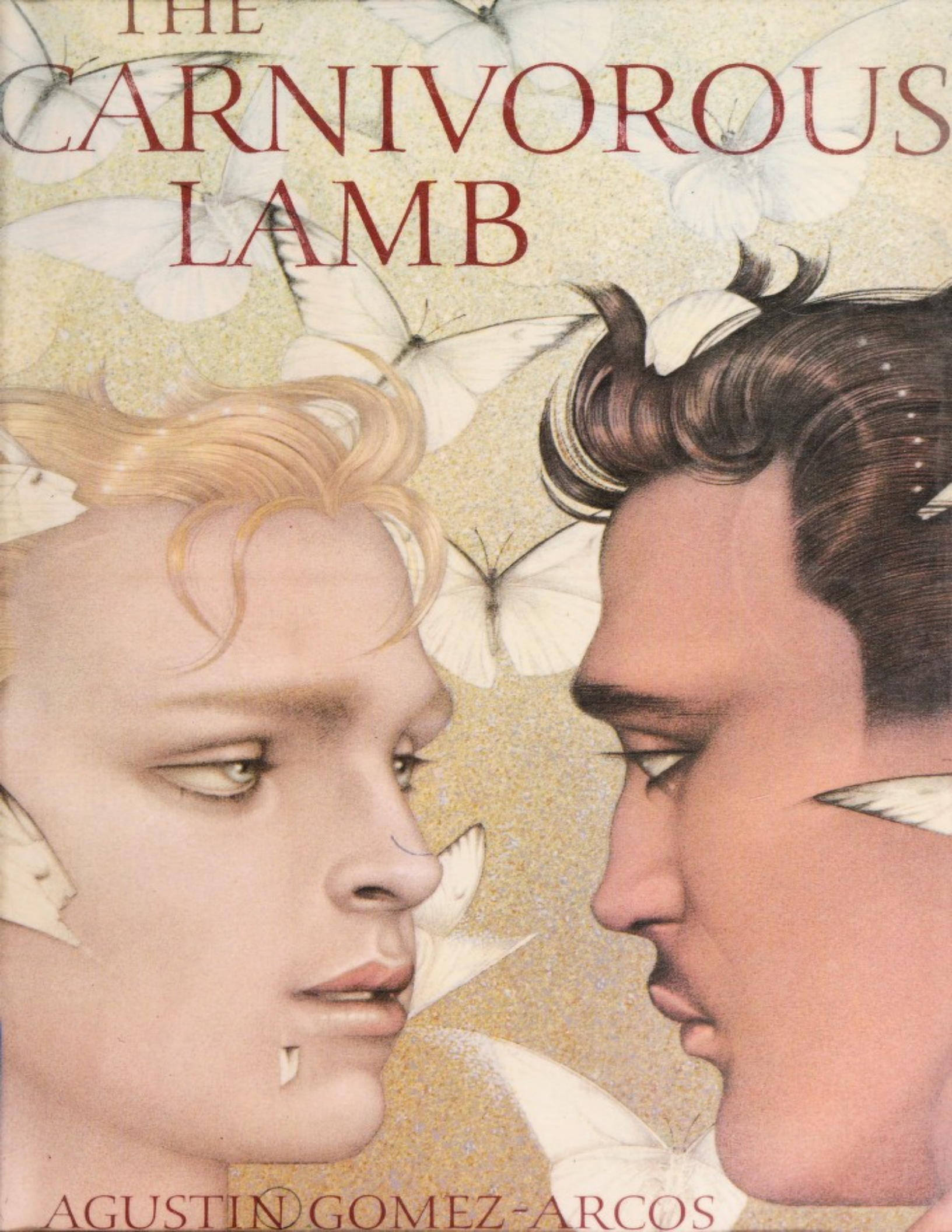
THE CARNIVOROUS LAMB



AGUSTIN GOMEZ-ARCOS

The carnivorous lamb

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The carnivorous lamb

Gomez-Arcos, Agustin

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CARNIVOROUS LAMB

a novel by Agustin Gomez-Arcos translated by William Rodarmor

A Bunuelian family saga set in Franco's Spain. The protagonists: Carlos, a ruined Republican lawyer; Matilde, a grande bourgeoise with revolutionary tendencies; and their sons, Antonio and Ignacio, brothers, allies, lovers.

Into a shuttered house, where ghosts of past rebellion and present defeat taint the air, Ignacio is born, the carnivorous lamb of the title. His father stays locked in his study, amid memories of political failure. His mother, vague but implacable ruler of her shadowy domain, refuses to acknowledge her younger son's existence. Only his brother, Antonio, is real—father-surrogate, teacher, protector, and, eventually, lover. This love affair is the hard core of the story, from which radiates an array of sharp spokes, neatly spearing

Franco, family. Church, and even a stray home-economics graduate from the United States.

Beyond the account of one family's suffocation under an intolerable regime, beyond its moving portrayal of two brothers' physical and spiritual love for each other, the carnivorous lamb offers an incisive, savagely funny, and not entirely despairing look at post-Civil War Spain.

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The

CARNIVOROUS LAMB

For

R.D.

whose advice and friendship have always sustained me A.G.A.

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CARNIVOROUS LAMB

CHAPTER

1

£ yes closed.

No image must come between me and the one I am waiting for, to disturb my hope or my memories. I want emptiness. I need a gap between the past I know so well and the present—and I have no idea how it will turn out.

What is today's date? I don't even dare ask myself. Why should I, after all? My mind is full of contradictory answers, I know, ready to appear and spread confusion. In everyday uncertainty, you have time to think. In sudden despair, you don't.

Eyes closed, filled with winter, I have spent the whole morning getting the house ready, as I have every day since I got here, last Friday at five in the afternoon. Eyes closed, it is Wednesday already. Next to my right ear, the hall clock just struck ten in the morning. Ten

brand-new hours of this brand-new Wednesday I have been waiting for, eyes closed, with a five-day, five-century chill in my soul.

Because today, Wednesday, is the first day of spring: a time of renewal that is going to determine my future. At last.

During this time—these five days of waiting, I mean— I've had to open my eyes to do what needed to be done, of

course. First, putting clean sheets on the bed, on the Friday I got here, at one minute past five in the afternoon (one minute: the time it takes to run up the stairs three at a time to the second floor, go into the room, get out the sheets and spread them on the bed).

Eyes open, I looked at that bed, made up with sheets from another time, sheets that still smell of Clara's quinces, but saw neither sheets nor bed; I saw a body, your body, strong as a tall strong tree, as whole as an untouched countryside, with that little trickle of sweat that was always running, even in memory, from your chest to your navel, summer and winter, snaking toward your hip, borrowing the glitter of the light. Eyes open, I see only old visions: memories of the future.

But that is exactly what I want. Such is my will. It reawoke the day I got your telegram, in Paris: "I am coming home at the beginning of spring. I will see you there."

An incongruous detail: your telegram, filled with unnecessary, expensive words, came at a time when I didn't have any money, when I'd given up on everything. With the money those extra words cost, I thought to myself, I could have bought myself some French fries and sausages—my poor man's fare in Paris—and a glass of beer, to boot. You could have said "Coming home. Expect you." Or simply, "Come home." I could even have treated myself to cigarettes. And what the hell, it was already March 15. The trip would only take two days, so why bother with a date? Nothing could have stopped me along the way. Why "the beginning of spring"? Money must be free and easy, in Venezuela.

And then I understood. "Beginning of spring” was a coded message of hope. March 21 was the day of my first communion, the day of our first real embrace, amid those clouds of butterflies.

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I clung to that certainty. Every half-dead part of me came to the surface in a final spasm of life. My cry for revenge swept all the daily despair out of the little maid’s room I was renting (seventh floor, no elevator, no water, no heat), and I packed my suitcase. I ran to the station and bought a ticket. Destination: you.

No books. "Two days on the train; I need to think, not read.” Not even a copy of my favorite poet; it’s the first time I’ve ever betrayed him. But that great poet (dead, alive, no matter) will understand perfectly what only looks like cowardice. And if he doesn’t, that’s just too bad. I had to spend those two days thinking, to wake up from my sleep. Once and for all.

In any case, I was sure my five days at home before that "beginning of spring” would pass quickly, like five light- days. I would have too much to do, too much dead and burning time to cool off, too much of our old life together to clean up, so as not to dirty your brand-new footsteps the moment you arrive. No time to think about the house, even once. (This is why I’m telling you, I thought of everything during that two-day trip. All I have left is to empty myself, purify myself, without vomiting. At least, I hope so.)

There was a lot to take care of, to make it all the way it was before, seven years ago, when everything was at its height, at the time of our last farewell: I mean the words, the gestures, the averted glances, all invented the better to say goodbye, the way people always do.

Always? . . . Yes, I think so ... Or were we the first?

Now I know: the day we said goodbye was the first ever created for that kind of parting. No one else had ever used it. No other day had

ever seen the like.

If instead of losing myself in your eyes, as usual, I had been more aware, if I had looked around me even while I was playing the scene, I would have noticed the cataclysm

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that must have been happening: an eclipse of the sun, red blood on yellow roses—a national cataclysm, but Mother's own, as well—the day of a farewell we felt was forever.

In fact, those two days on the train were too short to go over everything and make it part of myself. Because where you are concerned I have to go back to the roots, go against the current, with all the danger and fatigue that implies.

I ate nothing. I drank nothing. Ï only smoked. Two days of trains and nicotine to get a whole life back. Two short, endless days.

At the village store, with my eyes both open and closed, I bought a bar of the soap whose smell on you I have remembered for seven years now. (I don't even know anymore if it was actually your smell, or the scent of the soap. Mother used to buy it in boxes of six, because of its scent, she said. But I've always mixed everything up, ever since I was little—because of you, thanks to you—and I could never keep the two straight. During all these years, with the memory of you clinging to me like a persistent beggar, I still couldn't. Now, when I sniff at the deepest part of my being, a wave of smell engulfs me—the scent of you. A hint of scent wafts by, intoxicating me—your smell. So how can I choose between the accuracy of Mother’s words and the accuracy of my memories?)

I went into the bathroom, turned the faucets on full, and waited, naked, for the tub to fill with warm water. I jumped in, soaped myself over and over and over ... So many new smells to erase, if I was to

get back to your smell and mine. I soaped myself every one of those five days, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, and again this morning. ... I scrubbed over and over, my skin becoming again the way it was when I was a child. These aren't a child's hairs, but then you knew them already, seven years ago, the day of our last farewell. (A farewell that stayed caught deep in my throat, choked off

by a spurt of hot blood; yours came out, though, an icy slap.)

Yes, I'm raving. Can you blame me?

Last Friday at five, when I firmly crossed the threshold into the house, everything became clear at last. I knew exactly what I had to do: Friday, at 5:01, make the bed. 5:02, open the window to air out our room. 5:03, clean the mirror. 5.04, cut the flow ... oh yes, cut the flowers, and put them . . . put them back . . . the usual flowers, I think . . . put them once again into the . . . but then I saw your naked body on the bed again, that little stream of sweat running down your chest, suddenly spilling onto me like a river in flood . . . running from your chest, running . . . where, exactly?

I think I wasted too much time in the bathtub. On purpose. I wanted to forget about everything I still had to do. And do you know what I really wasted valuable time on? Complaining about how long it was taking for these last five days of winter to end. I've lived through twenty-five winters, and I'm healthy enough to see many more (I'm making horns with my fingers, to ward off the evil eye), but no winter has been or will ever be as deathly long as this five-day- long winter since my arrival.

That "beginning of spring" is so damned vague! And you know I've always liked precision, how Mother's hands, fluttering vaguely from her piano to her crocheting, from her crocheting to the rosebush, from her rosebush to her lips, from her lips to her tears, used to drive me crazy. I was only six, and I couldn't explain why. You just

laughed. I remember distinctly: you always used to laugh when something drove me crazy. That's what made you happiest, I think.

Eyes closed, sitting in this wicker chair, this chair of Mother's that you know so well—a yellow garden of exotic flowers, yellow cage for rare birds, yellow scrap of a yellowed

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photograph—the one Mother had the bad habit of curling up in, losing herself like a tiny flower, a tiny bird, a tiny picture from another time, everything yellow, the color of frustration (why this gust of unwelcome memories?), my hands gripping the two carved doves artistically capping the armrests, looking as if they are trying to escape and I am holding them back, locked up forever in their wicker cage, sitting in this chair that I could be describing for you better (did you see it the way I did?), my eyes stubbornly closed, riveted to the door you will be opening any moment now, wondering why the fucking clock goes on ticking (you see, I'm going back to my old way of talking), that goddamned relentless clock, like an enemy eye, there, next to my right ear. You'd think the bastard had it in for me. Otherwise, why would it be shoving the bitterness of your not coming down my throat?

Not-yet-not-yet-not-yet, five agonizing days of not-yets, from five o'clock in the afternoon last Friday till this morning, Wednesday . . . Eyes closed, riveted to the door whose lock I have oiled thousands of times since I got here, Friday at five in the afternoon, when I suddenly realized: "Good God, the door! It's going to squeak! If he opens it, and it squeaks, it will be just like coming home on any ordinary day, and not returning to heaven or hell—in any case, not what I want. Come on, oil the lock, do it!" Five days of chores, from five o'clock in the afternoon on Friday till ten o'clock this morning (plus a few not-yets, since the fucking clock won't stop): the bathtub, the door, soap in one hand, oil in the other, uncovering the original smell, the passage to the parallel world. Our smell. Our world.

Eyes closed, door closed, the not-yets surrounding me in the silent hall like a pack of dogs with gaping jaws and pointed teeth.

If you really wanted to spend money, why couldn’t you have wired: "I will be home March 21 at 11 a.m. sharp.

Come/'? Good lord, why did you do it this way? Was it to throw me into this anxiety?

You never knew what anxiety was. From the moment I opened my eyes, an incredible sixteen days after I was born, you were always sure of everything where I was concerned. It was all laid out in advance for you, even the unexpected.

Do you remember?

Mother used to say I was born with the will to stay blind forever. From time to time, she would deign to talk about that whim of mine on the phone to whoever would listen. And when she made up her mind to talk, to tear herself out of her silence and talk, all her restraint fell away.

For fifty-two years, Mother lived locked in a sticky silence that she inflicted on the house like a punishment. Even when I was a little child, my curiosity already awakened, I understood that while the silence was her own punishment at first, it gradually trapped us all. It was like an oil stain, growing a little larger every day, like a sickness that kept spreading. Mother enjoyed it so much that her hard soul showed clearly through the ever-present fog of her vagueness. She watched as the silence lapped at us like a rising tide, drowning us. She would smile then, a smile that she never turned on my child's slumber. When I asked about it, you said, "It’s because she's a Catholic." But in spite of the shit-heap of religious bric-a-brac cluttering her room here and the other house in town, I never once saw Mother set foot in church.

To her friends, on the telephone: "My dear, I was horrified. Well, not horrified, exactly, I'm exaggerating." (She wanted it understood that

she didn't love me enough to be horrified.) "Deeply shocked would be more like it. His stubbornness made me ill. He kept his eyes closed so tight, it gave him wrinkles. And not just his eyes, but his fists, too. For sixteen days, he didn't cry, he didn't scream, nothing. Sixteen days! Blind willpower, lying in a cradle. His brother

Antonio just watched him, completely fascinated. He gave up his games, his drawing books, everything. And Antonio was always a good student, you know." (How could you have been a good student? You were only five!) "In spite of my poor health, I would get up in the middle of the night to try to catch him with his eyes open in the darkness, smiling at some devil . . . who knows where the Devil hides? A waste of time, my dear. Forever blind, day and night, and determined to stay that way. What an ordeal! . . . That's right, a horror. Yes, but wait, I'm not finished. On the tenth day, I decided to take him to Lourdes. Yes, Lourdes. I was out of my mind with rage. I said to myself, Til throw him into the miracle pool . . .' Did you know they had one? ... Yes, yes, several maybe, but let's not quibble. 'Either we'll have a miracle, or a drowning.' You see, I would have preferred a tiny little grave covered with peonies—since I would have to mourn quite a long time—than to have to face that freak crouching in his blind hell all my life." (Mother was pouring out her story in one long rush, without pausing for breath.)

"Fortunately, I had recovered, and had got my courage back. I ordered a whole new wardrobe, all black, to show off my sorrow with dignity as we traveled around the country. At Lourdes too, of course. And can you imagine, when my mind was made up and my suitcases packed, Carlos" (that was Father) "said, and I quote: 'If you let those fucking nuns touch one hair of that kid's head, I'll cut your throat!' He always talked like that, you know. That's why I married him, to strike a balance between my piano and his language." She gave an odd little laugh, as incongruous as a crucifix in a mosque. "I'll tell you the rest some other day. I'm really too tired right now."

Mother would hang up then. Her hand, clenched during the whole monologue, would suddenly soften like hot wax, melting drop by

drop as it fluttered endlessly around her

parlor, always starting at the piano, and ending up dabbing at her (imaginary) tears.

During another monologue I overheard much later, as I lay hidden somewhere in the parlor, I learned that Mother, cheated of her cause, had had white cuffs and collars sewn on all her black dresses, "To spare others the sight of my borrowed mourning/' After that, her wardrobe never changed; that way, she was careful never to let me forget the serious rift between us, which had only worsened the day I opened my eyes.

"Sixteen days!" she exclaimed. "Can you believe it? He waited sixteen days to open his eyes! We were all standing around his cradle, and do you know what he did? Without hesitating, he looked straight at his brother, staring at him as if he were trying to hypnotize him. My dear, you can't imagine how upset I was. Never, but never, will I forget those eyes, opening to the light for the first time, already full of shadows picked up God knows where. What infernal whirlwind was he riding during those sixteen days of my torment? What brought him to such a state? I never knew. He never looked at me. Or at his father either. His unblinking eyes were still locked on his brother's. I leaned over and said, 'My poor little baby.' The others were so silent, it was getting embarrassing. And I was his mother, after all; I had to say something."

Did Mother ever stop to think that those "shadows" fell on me while I was still in her womb? That it was I who had chosen to leave them behind? Did she understand that I put off opening my eyes as an act of courage, so as not to mix up the world I was coming from with the one I was to live in?

From the moment Mother first told me, "I never wanted you," I undertook to go back in my past to a time before I was born. And I began to understand. She started resenting me the day my fetus swelled her belly too much for her to

bend elegantly over her damned rosebush. But I understood that my desire for revenge was too facile, too romantic. I have gone further. I have reached love, or rather the death of love. A commonplace tragedy.

Her rosebush . . . am I smiling, by any chance? That rosebush is a whole other story. Better not to tell it to you just yet. There are lots of stories you haven't heard, you know. You were too big to hide behind the sofa or the large potted plants that flanked the French windows in her parlor. That wouldn't have been like you, anyway. You ran your life just as you pleased, just as you ran mine. That's why you never needed to spy on Mother. You had been wanted, waited for, created and recreated like one of her embroideries, or like all the first notes of the pieces she played on her piano. I was conceived in carelessness, by accident. So I decided, ever since that burst of paternal pleasure, to assert myself against her wishes like a weed.

You would never guess all the things I learned about my "previous" life during those phone talks Mother had with those invisible, completely anonymous entities, her friends. I never once looked Mother in the eye; not to punish her, as she claimed, but to spare her my pity. Maybe to make her feel guilty, too. But is making someone feel guilty the same as punishing them? I'm no judge of that. I'd rather be thought of as a little bastard born of his own slime.

Eyes closed, sitting in Mother's armchair, this wicker armchair I have taken over as my own (Mother won't rise from her grave to ask for it back), wrapped in the shadowy darkness of the hallway where only the not-yets of the clock are still alive, I am waiting for you. With a clear conscience, I accused Mother of not loving me. I hope I won't have to accuse you of the same thing. Because if you were her darling, I was yours. This force-field has locked the three of us together from the very beginning. You must have inherited her vagueness, the way she inherited her armchair and her

piano, which threw her right back into that sick nostalgia for her girlhood. But that's over and done with. Mother's dead. You're alive. So am I.

Since last Friday at five, when I came back to the house, until this morning, Wednesday, I haven't dared face the problem. I mean our own problem, our war. But now, sitting in this wicker armchair-coffin that was Mother's exclusive property for eighteen years (and coveted for twenty-five) the issue is clear; it isn't in question anymore. I love you. I have always loved you.

And that love, more alive than ever, can never die, because it comes from the purity of sin. It was born in you and me the day the gates of heaven swung shut, far back in some time only our genes remember.

I love you.

Eyes closed, I open my mouth to say those new words. They may be old rags in other people's mouths, but they are fresh and new in mine. I enunciate them carefully, so as not to risk losing a single syllable, so as not to risk a cataclysm. During these seven years of missing you, I realize I have found peace.

The house is ready. I am ready, spring is here. No more need to open my eyes until I hear your footsteps crunching on the gravel of the garden, your key turning in the lock, your hand pushing the door open.

Eyes closed ... on this beginning of spring that promises to be a miracle, I am waiting for you . . . my brother. . . my brother-love.

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CHAPTER

2

S O ON the sixteenth day after my birth, I opened my eyes and unhesitatingly looked straight at my brother Antonio.

In town, we lived in a house Mother inherited, almost completely surrounded by a big garden. It consisted of a wide hallway, a spacious parlor where Mother would stand stiffly erect, surrounded by her old photos and aspirin-fed flowers, Father’s study, its door usually closed, the kitchen, a cellar full of fruits, vegetables, wine, salt pork, and other foods sent to us from the country, and the little room that belonged to Clara, Mother’s maid-of-all-work. Upstairs was a ridiculous dining room that nobody ever used, and two big bedrooms: Mother and Father’s (before he went into exile in his study) and the "other room,” where Antonio and I used to sleep.

If Clara’s stories are to be believed, Mother always used to call that room "my son’s room,” pointedly using the possessive to exclude me. When she said, "my son,” Mother always meant Antonio. But from that day forth, sixteen days after I was born, when our glances had locked, when my brother had my cradle moved to his domain (Clara did the carrying, but Antonio’s will held it up), "my son’s bed-

room” never became "the boys' bedroom/' but simply "the other room/' instead.

Any feeling of family closeness among the three of us was out of the question, but all the other bonds, the real ones, grew a little stronger every day, like carefully watered plants. Even as a little boy, I already responded to hate, guilt, sin (Clara's sharp tongue spat that one in Mother's face one evening), and in particular—speaking of family

feelings— the "smell of sulfur," a phrase that sent Mother's thoughts to the only thing she ever read, a black prayer book that she kept locked in the middle drawer of her desk.

"Don't talk so loud! Mama will hear us."

"She's sleeping at the other end of the hall."

"Still, you don't have to yell to tell me things I like to hear."

I dropped my voice, and repeated, "You've got hairs under your arms, and I don't."

"Don't worry, big boy," Antonio said, "that'll come." He laughed, without my knowing why.

Does discovering your body little by little lead to "smelling sulfur?"

Noon, during summer vacation. The sun was high in the sky. Mother, for once, had come into "the other roonj." Antonio had climbed down the branches of the chestnut tree and was doing his daily calisthenics in the garden. I was watching from the balcony, almost naked, drinking in the sight of my brother's grace. A secret, internal ritual. Mother sniffed the air like an animal, dropped her vagueness for once, and shouted, "Clara!"

As if driven by a well-oiled spring, her maid appeared at the doorway.

"Take those sheets off right away and put on clean ones! It smells of sulfur in here!"

Triumphantly, she stared at my back, knowing that this

time I would get her meaning. I too had seen the round stains on the sheets. So that's what "smelling sulfur" meant. Another mystery solved.

Out of breath, out of control, I could feel Mother standing motionless behind me, like a cat about to pounce. I deliberately looked at my brother's undershorts, at the burning needle that had shot hot sulfur onto my belly for the first time the night before.

A few moments later, Mother left "the other room" without savoring her victory, slipping like a shadow into the shadows of the hall, returning to her parlor, turning into an amoeba in that shadowy room. Everything in its place.

Going back to the beginning was easy. Scenes would snap into focus each time I heard Mother talking on the phone to what I liked to call her "invisible world." Out of laziness, or maybe just to be different, Mother never actually used anyone's name. She had just two stock phrases: "Darling, I wanted to talk to you!" when she called, and, "Is that you, darling?" when someone called her.

A scene drawn from Mother's monologues:

The day I was born, Mother's maid Clara did the proper thing: she made chicken soup. A corn-fed chicken, three months old, had been raised especially for the occasion. "The senora is in a state of expectancy," the peasants who worked Mother's estate in the country were told. "We'll need a chicken three months from now." (Mother's former estate, to be exact. Father never owned a thing in the world, and the estate has since been sold.)

At my birth, everything went as expected.

The doctor washed his hands, using the soap Mother felt was . . . etc., and left. The midwife laid me in the cradle. From force of habit, she tried to get everyone to come look, but Mother seemed in such pain they had to leave me, and start the grand ritual of chicken soup and silence. You could have heard a pin drop. Clara bustled about, went downstairs

with an armload of dirty towels, stirred her pots, climbed the stairs again with a load of clean ones, went into Mother's room, removed

the bouquet of flowers that were "using up all the air," left, went downstairs again, came back up, went back in, pulled the curtains closed, casting the room into shadow. (I was born on a fine sunny morning, but on that day apparently nobody wanted to see it.)

Mother's room became a shadowy chapel smelling of alcohol, chicken soup, fatigue, and the sweat of Mother in pain.

Father put his word in: "Are you feeling better, Ma- tilde?"

"The senora is doing very well," said Clara, putting in hers.

"He's not the first baby to use this cradle," said the midwife, "and I'll warrant he won't be the last." She liked her work; as far as she was concerned, people should have babies as often as possible.

A tempting, unknown smell enveloped me, floating against my nostrils like a cloud. Where was it coming from? Years later, I heard Mother call it "scent."

"Is that clear, Clara? No cologne for the boy's bath, just soap; it's cheaper." (It was her only economy.) "Besides, nothing is better for boys than the scent of a good soap. It makes men out of them."

The fragrant cloud spread around me, filled me. My brother, who had been soaped and scrubbed for the occasion, watched with amazement the tiny thing lying quietly in the cradle, eyes closed: me. tie was the only person who hadn't said a word.

(When you come through that door today, Wednesday, the first day of spring, I'll ask you: "Antonio, what were you thinking about, the day I was born?" It's a question I've never put to my brother, and yet I'm sure his answer is there, written in his blood. I could swear it. If I do ask, it

won't be out of idle curiosity—I'm not one of those people who constantly want to hear what they already know—but just for fun. Ten years ago, he would have had no trouble answering; he was so sure of himself then. But today, who knows? He's been married three years already.)

Time dragged on. One day followed another. Mother’s room no longer smelled of alcohol. Day four: Mother started to walk a little, taking tiny, dramatic steps from the bed to the window, the window to the bed. Day five: heavy sighs, as if from the depths of pain. Day six: no more chicken soup. Clara started cooking vegetables. The maternal stomach could take mashed potatoes. Day seven: glances full of concern or curiosity fell on me from every corner of the room, like a shower of anxious hypocrisy. An endless week. My brother Antonio stood motionless next to the cradle, watching me with calm insistence. And me? I didn't cry even once, my eyes still closed (Clara's account).

All at once, Mother forgot her suffering, set her jaw more firmly (to look energetic), put on her yellow dress (to look circumspect), went downstairs, burst into her parlor, yanked open her desk drawer, and pulled out her black book.

"Darling, it was abominable! I finally decided to get up and take a look at my prayer book. I thought, dt must have something to say about a situation like this.' "

Without satisfying the invisible curiosity of whoever was listening at the other end, Mother hung up. Her hand suddenly went limp, like hot wax, gradually fading away during the long peregrination around the parlor, which always started at the piano and ended up wiping away her (nonexistent) tears.

She had her dressmaker come to the house three days later, to discuss a new all-black wardrobe she needed for the trip to Lourdes. (After Father suffered his political reverses, Mother had stopped going into town.)

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Five dresses and two coats.

"One crepe, one velvet . . . yes, light ones, and one muslin. I can't stand wool; it's too heavy for my poor shoulders."

Long, deep sighs.

"Would you recommend hats or veils? Both? Yes, that's best. You never know what the weather will be like, north of the Pyrenees. If it's windy, then the veils ... I'd look like a sailboat."

Stifled laughter, suspicious glances.

"You are right, my dear, I don't know where I find the strength to be funny. My misfortune, you know ..."

More deep sighs.

"Two hats, the very thing.

"Still, a veil is so pathetic when it expresses grief. Just a breath of wind, the slightest breeze, and the image of veiled mourning becomes sublime. And it's so much more personal than a hat.

"For church, especially. I'll certainly have to go to church, and I can't go bareheaded, like some Englishwoman!"

"You're absolutely right, senora. The proprieties must be respected. Shall we say two veils and three hats?"

"That's perfect. I'm counting on you."

"Goodbye, senora."

"Goodbye, dear."

(My brother told me this, mimicking all the voices, the day I had my tonsils out. I started bleeding, and had to have shots. "Hard to laugh when you've had your throat cut," said the nurse.)

The dressmaker moved into the house with us, bringing his bolts of cloth and his hysterics. When he was inspired, which happened about every ten minutes, he became angelic, and Mother praised his brilliant ideas. His scissors would flash like lightning in the dark parlor, and Mother could see the very dress she would wear for the miracle.

k 19

Or: "That's positively inspired, my dear. I'll wear that one when I get off the train."

"You aren't going by car?" he exclaimed, a bit shocked underneath his politeness.

"Whatever are you thinking of, my dear? Who would see me, in a car?"

Attitude: Mother, rigidly erect next to her piano, surrounded by old family photos like guardian angels, a grieving Virgin Mary being dressed to follow her son up Calvary. (Where a son is involved, even a monster she hates, a mother always turns into a Pietà.)

"In that case, senora, I'm sorry, but we can't use this particular velvet. It can't bear the touch of steel. And trains are always made of steel, as far as I know."

"Wood too, my dear."

"If you say so," he said dryly. "But I beg you to reconsider, senora. How could we ever put this adorable velvet against the upholstery of a train seat? It's unthinkable!"

Mother, grandly: "I am planning to engage an entire car just for myself.” Then more simply: "I’ll obviously be weeping during the trip, and ... I may also have to pray, as well.” Then, humbly: "Otherwise, how can I hope for the miracle?”

Ah yes, the miracle. Musn’t forget that.

A pause.

"In that case, we’ll completely line the inside of the train.” Solemnly: "Please consider, senora, that neither you nor I can risk a failure.”

Mother, a bit absurdly: "May I remind you, my dear, that I am in pain. My son is blind.”

Drained by the effort, they sprawled on the sofa, not daring to raise their eyes to the ceiling that hid my "disgrace,” and treated themselves to a drop of brandy. (Clara’s gossip, perhaps exaggerated.)

Cloistered in Mother’s room this whole time, my eyes

still closed, I am sure I could hear people’s comings and goings: the midwife taking the doctor’s place, Clara taking the midwife’s, Father taking Clara’s, Mother sunk in her world of mourning, drowned in a sea of black dresses to be tried on, sometimes coming near my cradle, ceaselessly whispering to the dressmaker at her side, seriously discussing the idea of dressing me in black too, for the journey to the miracle, (I can’t be sure, but I think they decided to wrap me in a long sky-blue cloak covered with stars, which would be given to Our Lady of Lourdes once the miracle had taken place), my brother Antonio, wide-eyed, not budging an inch, stroking my closed lids and calling to me in that special voice of his that crept into my blood and shaped my nature.

The house turned dressmaker’s shop, cluttered with swatches of black fabric, Father locked in his office because he couldn’t stand Mother’s "Senor dressmaker” (Clara had to call him that, on Mother’s

orders), Clara who gave up taking my brother to nursery school ("I was worn out," the poor woman told me with a smile), the midwife, promoted to nurse and assigned to permanent duty in Mother's room to watch over the baby ("the little freak," thought Mother, but she said only, "the poor little thing"), Mother trying on dresses, veils, hats, gloves, and shoes all the day long, the telephone spreading the news of my "terrible infirmity" . . .

"I understand, darling, really I do. Thank you from the bottom of my (alas) broken heart, but I am not seeing anyone. I am really overwhelmed ..." and her hand, suddenly vague (etc., etc.).

Poor Clara, rushing around as if she were a thousand Claras and couldn't coordinate them, senor dressmaker refusing her cooking as if insulted, me still not opening my eyes, not crying, Mother's room, where the little freak lay, becoming a crossroads where everyone met, the house filled with harsh voices that dropped to shrill whispers once past

the door, an unexpected snowstorm falling on the old chestnut tree and lopping off two of its branches, the plumber peremptorily summoned because the sewer was stopped up and Mother's senor dressmaker couldn't abide the smell of toilets . . .

He: "How can I create art in this cesspool, senora?"

She: "It's the work of the Devil!"

Tragically clutching the phone, Mother called for help as if someone in the house were dying, hanging up in mid-sentence, rushing to her black book, a half-basted sleeve on one arm, her shoulder bare to make senor dressmaker's work easier. Hysteria in the air ... a dog howling the night of the thirteenth day after my birth, me stubbornly squeezing my eyes so tightly that I looked like a wrinkled little old man, Clara weeping from the exhaustion of climbing thousands of stairs, Father coming in at neutral moments to plant a kiss on my forehead, then hurrying out (did he love me, I wonder?), my brother, rooted to the spot, devouring me with his eyes . . . The house gone

mad, blind anarchy stealthily taking it over, spreading dust over rugs and furniture, fouling the air and wilting the once living, now decapitated garden flowers in their vases.

Mother, suddenly energetic, chased Clara out of the kitchen and set about making eggs in aspic and cream sauces for senor the dressmaker, who was in danger of starving to death before his black work was done. She set the table with yellow lace, lit the yellow candles in their silver holders, uncorked a bottle of golden champagne, and put some old yellowed Chopin thing on the record player.

(All this on the thirteenth night after I was born, the night the dog howled.)

"We must exorcize the danger, my dear. I'm not about to let the Devil spoil my trip to Lourdes."

One of her black dresses was ready. She put it on, with a

diamond ring, and a strand of pearls at her throat. They ate like royalty, Mother and her senor dressmaker. (These were secrets revealed by my confessor, who was trying to point out Mother's pluck —"as strong a woman as they come"— the day I spat out my big sin to him: "I hate her!")

And when people least expected it, when the whole town was discussing the upcoming miracle as if it had already happened (at Lourdes, of course, not here in town, and sometime in the future), the sixteenth day after my birth, at five past eleven in the morning, I, the freak, opened my eyes and looked straight at my brother Antonio, faithfully standing guard by my cradle. On the alert.

The two of us stayed like that for several long minutes, our first awareness of each other undimmed by the gloom of our surroundings. Slowly my brother's face split into a smile like a burst

of sunlight—a sun that would warm me for many long years, until the day of our last farewell, when the cold that has now dried out my soul suddenly gripped me.

(I want to observe a solemn minute of silence for you, for me, to blur your image—this sudden rush of memories— and settle back into emptiness, to allow the winter within me to become huge.)

It occurs to me that on the day I awoke, a cataclysm hit the house: hurried steps, muffled shouts. In her distraction, Clara even opened the room’s drawn curtains to witness the event by the light of day.

Around me, something strange happened: all activity miraculously stopped, as if everything people had been doing up to then was suddenly pointless. Hands didn’t know where to settle, eyes where to light, mouths didn't know what to say. Bodies just hung there, useless, on strike. Clearly, Lourdes had been caught short.

I had finally opened my eyes, but too soon and too suddenly. No one had planned for this contingency, least of all

2 3

Mother. She stared right through me. Staggering over to the window, shading her eyes with her left hand, she angrily whipped the curtains shut with her right.

"Get that thing out of my room!”

Her shout startled my brother. Small though he was, he bravely threw himself across the cradle to protect me. (How could I not love you, Antonio?) That is why Clara, once she recovered from her surprise, moved my cradle into my brother's room. Clara's arms carried it, but it was my brother's will that pulled the maid along the hallway.)

Mother stayed behind in her room, her eyes empty. Never would my baby's cries disturb the motionless air of the den where she buried

herself like a fossil. But down the hall, through the thick walls of two rooms, her sleepless, disenchanted gaze fell on me, and me alone.

That was when she began to resent me. By opening my eyes too soon, I had spoiled the greatest dream that frustrated woman ever had: her long, long and black journey to the miracle.

I have never loved Mother, I know. My feelings for her were quite the reverse. But when I think about it, a sort of deep anxiety knots my stomach: the image of an octopus in my dreams. I don't know why. (Maybe just because she is dead at last.)

CHAPTER

3

M other's dressmaker died shortly afterward, killed by his failure, some said. Whether dead or alive, I still can't say what he looked like. Was he tall or short, fat or thin? I have no idea, and for that matter, never gave it a thought; all my memories of him are secondhand. Mother tore up the announcement of his death, and didn't attend the funeral.

The house started to rot, like a rag forgotten in a damp storeroom. Clara, who told me all this in the back of the garden, where a little thicket of jasmine muffled our voices, was sure Mother loved it. She had started breathing normally again, and begun to seem almost alive. She still avoided looking in my direction, of course, and hardly said a word to me. On the other hand, she lavished the most expensive clothes on me, with gold chains and medallions to hang around my neck—the gilded chains of a tormented slave?—all engraved with the same date: not with my birthday, but with the date when I first opened my eyes, sixteen days later. It might have looked as though she were spoiling me, but I think she was punishing me instead. In fact, I'm sure of it.

One of Mother's friends in her invisible coterie, a so- called artist, designed a wardrobe for those clothes. Mother

had it built by a cabinetmaker and put in the upstairs hall right next to the ''other ' 7 room. The wardrobe looked vaguely foreign—a reminder of her failed voyage? My carefully designed monogram was ostentatiously etched into the mirror, and my baby clothes piled on the shelves.

Every week, the mail brought parcels of clothes she ordered from Madrid, crammed with enough lace, organdy, crepe, and soft

woolens to outfit a whole nursery. Fully aware that we were fast running out of money, Mother worked hard to give me expensive tastes when I was a child, the better to underscore the misery of my adolescence. When it comes to revenge, we all have our own style; Mother's ran to delayed action, like a time bomb. She was a terrorist, in her fashion.

Did she ever think of anything besides me? I don't believe so. Her hate grew along with me, becoming as much a part of me as my shadow. If by some chance I had died, her hate would have hung in her empty heart like some gigantic orphan.

Am I being unfair to her? I don't think so. Deep down, I never felt that way.

After she died, I carefully searched that desk of hers, driven not by remorse, certainly, but by the unhealthy hope of discovering a secret life—a love affair, or something equally unmentionable. I found nothing but old bills, duplicates of orders, and of course the black prayer book. (Also an old buried pleasure of hers, a pile of sheet music turned to dust, played without passion, unfinished, ever.) What emerged was an old-fashioned lady of quality crossed with a middle-class housewife who balanced her books. Religious, in her own way. (Mother's only visitor was her confessor, who came twice a year, at All Saints' and Easter. The rest of the year, the prayer book stood in for her missing God.)

Now I can say it, Antonio: Mother often blamed my passionate love for you on that absent God. She always sus-

pected you of taking His place in my conscience. That is why I spat out, "I hate Mother!" in our confessor's face that day, and I'm proud of it.

I know Mother's ghost can't help coming back at times, borrowing my face—so like her own—to look at life through my eyes. Escaping a

hell without pianos, parlors, or yellow roses, she rushes desperately to her last window on a world where no one misses her. At those moments, I force her to look at all the things she never wanted to see—starting with my real face.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: Mother neglected her household duties to build a universe of hate around me. Not systematically, but by indirection. The way she arranged the mirrors, for example, where in a flash I would catch her staring intently at my reflection. For all of Clara's endless cleaning, those mirrors are still permanently stained with her enmity.

“I don't know what else to do, senora. Soon you won't be able to see a thing."

"One can always see something," Mother would say enigmatically.

Another dimension.

Ears pricked, Clara would purse her lips and not think of the Devil. A nonbeliever she was, Clara the Clear.

Mother had another way of looking, too, that bored into me when I had my back turned, making a vacuum around me, driving out every molecule of air, of life. Suffocation.

I would leap up like a cat and flee to the garden to fill my lungs with air.

Eventually, though, I would have to go back inside and climb the stairs to the safety of our room, pretending I was a house rat for that perilous journey. I wasn't able to climb the chestnut tree yet, the way my acrobatic brother could.

Like a sick patient, the house deteriorated further every day. Wherever you stepped, a board would groan softly. An

abscess suddenly appeared on my behind: the sickness was getting contagious.

Still, you had the feeling that the house was trying not to complain, trying hard to keep its pain a secret, so as not to burden us, its dear occupants . . . but it complained all the same, it couldn't help it. The pain rose from the depths of its foundations. Signs of the disease could be seen with the naked eye: a greenish ooze was always running down the walls, the paint was flaking, as if the house were peeling, or rather rotting. It was practically a corpse.

Our room was the only island spared by the unknown sickness. Antonio was careful to open the window every day, and let the chestnut tree send in healthy sea breezes scented by the garden, the sweet basil especially. Our room was like the one good eye in a face eaten by leprosy.

One day, Clara couldn't stand the coffin we were living in any longer. She bought some cans of white paint (whitewash would have been too rustic for Mother), and got to work— but without singing, the way she usually did in the kitchen, so as not to rouse Mother from the lethargy of her shadowy room. A cloth wrapped around her head, Clara took a big kitchen knife and scraped practically every wall in the house, wherever Father and Mother weren't likely to cast their ghostly shadows. She worked steadily, as if she were peeling a potato, with newspapers spread on the ground to catch the scrapings. The ruined walls gradually bared their nakedness. Diagnosis: liver disease. For the first time, Clara laughed. Armed with bucket and sponge, she started to scrub, and a clean smell of washing filled the house, lingering over the furniture and settling on the rugs—a whiff of life displacing the old smell of jasmine and mustiness.

Wide-eyed at this feast of the unexpected, I tottered around, my legs still wobbly, amid paint cans, brushes, scrapers, yellow plastic buckets (why yellow?), yellow nylon sponges (yellow again), and old yellowed newspapers (al-

ways yellow!). Where had she found them, now that we never bought papers anymore? (Father and Mother didn't want to know what was happening outside.)

Mother: "The war was outside. The world doesn't have anything else to teach us. From now on, Clara, I want you to keep that door shut."

Father: "I know what the newspapers are going to be saying now." To Mother, he said: "Cancel all my subscriptions, starting today." To Clara: "Don't let anyone in except the few clients who are still faithful to me ... if there are any left."

According to Clara, this was on their fourth wedding anniversary, in the merry month of May, 1939. Antonio was born in 1943, I in 1949.

So those old yellowed newspapers were left over from those days! Like a pack-rat, Clara had saved everything.

My fancy children's clothes were spattered all over with paint. Her eyes shining, Clara pretended to get angry for real.

"You little devil! As if your poor Clara didn't have enough work to do! Don't you pity me? Put down that paintbrush, senorito!" (Whenever she called me "senorito," I could feel the hidden insult.) "Look what you've done to your nice shiny shoes! You rascal! I'm going to throw you into a big tub of bleach; you'll see how white I can wash you!" (That was a contradiction; I was white already.)

But she was laughing, Clara the Clear. In point of fact, it was my brother who bathed me when he came home from school. He would run his firm, gentle fingers all over my little body, imprinting my skin with a visceral need for his caresses that I have never lost.

I was barely five, frail and blond, a tender little god wandering in the shadows of the house, eyes and ears alert, my only sources of information about the outside, the world of the conquerors.

Very slowly, as Clara's wash-worn hands swelled with fatigue, the house started to revive. Resurrected, but still dead. Clara no longer had to tear through the garden swinging a knife like a vandal to cut fresh flowers every day. The ones she put around the house stayed beautiful for a whole week. And the water in the vases didn't go stale so fast; she only needed to change it every three days.

When she had finished painting a wall, Clara replaced the paintings, French etchings, silver holy-water founts and braided wreaths she had stacked in the corner. I would carefully examine all those treasures while she was working. The house was usually so dark I couldn't see them when they were in their places. They included:

A permanently terrified face (they call it ecstasy), lit up by one of the Lord's angels, absurdly cast as a spotlight;

A snake with a human face slithering out of a crack in a rock;

A child, blond like me, standing heedless at the edge of a cliff, miraculously held up by the wings of his guardian angel, while a butterfly fluttered temptingly above the drop and Hell, a reddish, bloody chasm, yawned far below;

Grandma and Grandpa, or a reasonable facsimile, bathed in a yellowish aura (our family color), their eyes vacant, already dead and gone;

And, by some miracle, a boat! A boat setting out to sea (I • was sure the artist wanted to show it leaving, not coming in), with a glorious crown of seabirds perched way up in her rigging, a line of handkerchiefs waving goodbye along the wharf, and a moustachioed captain (he looked just like Father) standing stiff and solemn on deck, his gaze already fixed on the horizon. Agape with wonder, my little mouth said it better than 1 could: someday, my brother Antonio would have a moustache like that, and we would go away together on a boat to . . . but the five short years of life in me

didn’t yet know where a horizon led to, or even where one began or ended.

Clara opened the door for one of Father’s infrequent clients. A stream of light suddenly flooded the hallway like an unexpected visitor bursting in unannounced. The dust came to life in a cosmic ballet. From the looks of it, Clara’s work didn’t bear close scrutiny, but at least it was clean. Father’s client looked about, surprised at not feeling he had to cross a bridge of sighs to get to the study at the end of the hall. Aware of their mission, the flowers took advantage of the shadows’ brief retreat to waft their perfume into the air. The client knocked discreetly at the door to the study. Father opened it, and the client disappeared.

I didn’t catch a glimpse of Father. As a matter of fact, I almost never saw him, and his work was a mystery to me. When his study door was ajar, I would prick up my ears like a hunting dog; I could hear a voice on the radio, full of false humility; probably a priest. Or maybe a military type; the voice couldn’t hide a certain note of triumph.

(At the time, I didn’t know what they were talking about, but the words "peace” and "victory” ringed me with ripples of sound like so many guided missiles. It was only years later that I understood both the voice on the radio and Father’s life and death.)

For some reason, Mother’s presence didn’t threaten the entire house with catastrophe this whole time. She was nowhere to be seen, but I was very cautious all the same. I quietly left my room every morning, quietly closed the door, took a handkerchief from the wardrobe (my nose was always running when I was little, and I loved wiping it on a handkerchief that was beautifully embroidered with my initials), and quietly tiptoed halfway down the hall to the landing. Taking tiny steps with infinite care, my feet instinctively falling wherever the rug muffled the squeaky floorboards,

holding my breath till I turned blue, I peered down the hall, keeping a sharp eye on Mother's room. The door was closed. Not a ray of light showed; inside, all was dark. Then I took a breath and raced down the stairs, hardly touching the steps. Once in the hallway, I glanced over at Mother's parlor; there wasn't any light under this door, either. What was going on? Was Mother dead?

A black hole of silence opened in my head, an enormous pit where the truth burst out like fireworks. That was it! Mother was dead. At last!

Hungrily, 1 started imagining how it had happened. Restraint and fear fell away. It must have caught her so fast that she didn't have time to call the family or shout for help. Bumped off without any warning; it was a dream come true. Maybe she was still in there, holding the phone, unable to say "Thank you so much, darling." Stiff as a poker, and yellow forever. Precise at last.

Wasn't that what Antonio meant when he used to sing:

You 11 be stiff when you die, my beauty,

Stiff and yellow, hey hey!

That was it, she was dead. She died in that shadowy parlor, one of her long monologues cut short. She could rot all by herself, without any false tears. A fine death, and well deserved. As for us, we would seal up the parlor doors and windows and plug all the cracks, so the smell of decay wouldn't infect us. We would finish cleaning the house once and for all. We might even throw the front door wide open and say hello to people in the street. I was sure Clara wouldn't have any trouble learning to say hello with a beautiful smile. (She had one, even if she was stingy with it.)

I set to work in a state of exhaltation that day. Lighthearted, I started to sing.

"You're singing, are you?"

“Oh, yes!”

“Are you happy?”

“Oh, yes!”

“That’s good.”

“Oh, yes!”

“I’d sure like to know what could have happened this morning to make you sing like that.”

“Mama’s dead.”

Instead of the shout of joy I expected, there was complete silence. Clara just stared at me, wide-eyed, a paintbrush in one hand and a sponge in the other, as if turned to stone for the rest of her days. A wave suddenly rose from the depths of her gut, and her mouth vomited yellow foam.

I watched her carefully. “No doubt about it,” I thought, “Yellow really is our color. Even Clara, who is only the maid, can’t get away from it.” When she could finally use her hands again, Clara tried to wipe away the yellow vomit dripping from her lips.

Only then did I realize I had upset her. She obviously hadn’t been expecting Mother to die just yet.

“Shit,” I said to myself, “today wasn’t the day.”

For her part, Clara felt she had to say something:

“Do you realize what you just said?”

“Oh, yes!”

“How could you imagine such a thing?”

“Just like that.”

Without taking her eyes off me, Clara sat down on a step and burst into tears, like a dried-up spring that starts flowing again after an earthquake.

She wasn’t expecting an answer, I don’t think, so I kept quiet, though I had plenty to say on the subject. Oh well . . . Covered with a yellowish mixture of vomit and tears, Clara’s face wasn’t much to look at. I couldn’t understand how I had made her so sad. It must have been her age. Old Clara.

“But don’t you think she’ll die, someday?”

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I was asking in all seriousness. It cut her crying short, though her lips kept on moving in a funny way, as if she couldn’t unclench her teeth to answer me. When she finally managed, after a great effort, only a low gurgle came out of her lips. Had she taken to drink?

Finally, in a hoarse voice: ‘'Let me finish my work.”

“Clara, answer me!”

“Damn it, let me do my work!” (She shouted, needless to say, a shout of unbelievable proportions.)

“O.K., I'll help you.”

Ten long minutes of silence went by. She scrubbed without letup. Clara the Clean.

“Can you feel the house starting to come alive again?” (This in a casual tone, like something said earlier or later, unrelated to the present context.)

“Yes.”

“Isn’t it nice, like this?”

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Sure.

Clara the Clear. Within her, an eternity must have passed. Her fingers stroked my forehead, played with my blond hair. In a moment of passionate tenderness, she brought her face close to mine, and kissed me fiercely on the lips. Smeared with vomit and tears, I laughed like a dirty little maniac. Dirty and yellow.

From then on, our undertaker-decorator job came into its own. The house really did start rising from its ashes. It hadn’t actually died, just wanted to get our attention, to give us its personal views on life and death. Clara had understood that the sores and cracks had only been warnings. Instead of giving up in despair, she had gotten to work.

Clara the Clean would polish the job off.

Suddenly—that’s the only way to describe it—Mother appeared at the top of the stairs. She was wearing a black dress with white collar and cuffs, and white—or were they

yellow?—pearls around her neck. All music died; panic- stricken, the air rushed out of the house.

"Clara, stop that!"

When Mother spoke to Clara, you felt her authority right away. But she didn't need to shout; just her presence was enough to stop everything. The blood-red carnations Clara had set on a hall table dropped their petals in seconds. The chestnut tree drowsing in the garden forgot that it was only noon, and cast its whole shadow across the doors and windows in an unexpected eclipse. The

blackbird stopped singing in the jasmine thicket, which now smelled only of decay. In my dream painting, the sea rose and swallowed boat, captain, moustache, seabirds, and waving handkerchiefs. The horizon was gone.

Mother came down the stairs, her white cuff merging with her white —yellow?—hand as it slid down the banister (a nightmare image from the horror movies of my teens).

"I already told you this house was a tomb, my tomb. Do I have to say it again?"

Clara looked away, trying to catch my eye, but her gaze was lost in the gathering darkness. I was already well hidden behind the big flowerpot in the hall corner. A dwarf orange- tree, a souvenir of Grandfather's visit to Japan, protected me from lightning-bolts.

A pause. You could count Mother's steps on the stairs one by one. I felt as if the sun had circled the horizon a dozen times.

"My poor Clara."

Mother's voice said this disturbing word of tenderness. From where I was, I could only see her feet, on the last step already, hesitantly setting out across the hall carpet. Left? Right? Undecided, they headed for the church pew against the parlor wall (a souvenir of a clergyman uncle of Mother's). She sat down, her ankles suddenly going soft and

vague, like hot wax, etc. A tiny lambskin opened its jaws and devoured them. A carnivorous lamb.

That lambskin was a fancy of Mother’s when she was a little girl, Clara had told me. On the day of her first communion, her godfather gave her a frizzy white lamb with a pink satin ribbon around its neck. The little girl was so happy, she wished the tiny animal would never

grow up. My grandmother, who loved her daughter very much, had the lamb slaughtered and skinned, and its tanned hide lined with pink satin. This was done for Mother's confirmation, when she was named Matilde for good, after my grandmother. Clara said that Mother had really loved the present.

"My poor, dear Clara, you don't know what despair is." (A pause. One of her hands was probably fluttering above her yellow hair.)

"Come here, and I'll tell you. Someday I had to tell somebody, and it might as well be you."

Carefully avoiding the spread newspapers, the paint buckets and brushes, Clara's feet slowly, very slowly, edged closer to Mother's, as if reluctant—or afraid. One of Mother's hands tossed a cushion onto the floor next to her.

"Sit down here, Clara. I don't want you standing up for me anymore. That's all over with. Sit down, my dear."

Clara must have looked like a bird facing a snake, motionless despite its urge to flee high in the sky. Clara dropped stiffly onto the cushion. Her nervous hands unconsciously stroked the carnivorous lambskin's curls.

"You smell of laundry, my dear. That's natural, you might say, considering your work. But my poor Clara, don't you realize that when someone has chosen despair as a way of life, laundry just doesn't matter anymore?"

Mother's words have stayed burned in my memory like a brand. On that day outside of ordinary time, a very special day in Mother's life, I greedily bent to the open sore, I too, a carnivorous lamb.

CHAPTER

4

£ ven if you think you know me well, my dear, I don't believe you know what I'm about to tell you, because it has nothing to do with the story of my life. It is my story. I never felt the need to tell it to you before today, but now I can see you are defying me, so the time for explanations is at hand.

"My dear, you know that a little girl is a lie, a he that grows a little every day, but never in the same direction. She's a chameleon lie, like an artificial flower injected every season with a chemical to make it change color—white today, black tomorrow, day after tomorrow . . . whatever is appropriate. One day, alas, she reaches a point where she shows the world a neutral, undefinable color. She doesn’t stop being a flower, only now, my dear, she is hidden, secret. A hypocritical flower. Forever.

"Women's misery is made at their first bloom, by which I mean when they are children. Women never reach happiness; you know that as well as I. They don't learn happiness, just the courage to feign it. They earn nothing, they inherit; they own nothing, they belong. In most cases they are simply the result of chance: their social milieu, their parents, the man who marries them, the sons they bear. If a little girl is well brought up, as I was, that lack of independence be-

comes an obligation she can bear with dignity. None of this has anything to do with happiness, of course. As far as I know, dignity never made anyone happy. I consider myself a dignified woman; it has always been my cardinal virtue. So I can now say I am unhappy.

I won't say deeply unhappy, because the words don't mean anything. I would be setting limits where none exist. As you know, my dear, I am a lady. That says it all, unfortunately.

'Take my sense of touch, for example. My skin has never felt anything but silk, muslin, or crepe de Chine. You will certainly think it ridiculous, but a screen has always stood between me and the wind. The sun could not penetrate whatever hat or parasol protected me, flies were stopped by my veil, and—as far back as I can remember—a lace glove was always there to slip between my skin and the world of objects.

"Of course, I am talking about a time that is already dead, the time before I was engaged."

(Hidden behind the dwarf orange forest, I was enjoying the scene. It was the first play I had ever watched.)

Completely in character, Mother was choosing her voice and gestures carefully. An easy tone when she said "my dear," or talked about her dignity or social status; two notes below the normal emotional range when she talked about happiness or misery. Studied elegance, distance. In the fog that surrounded her vague memories, the image of a cradle clearly stood out, the symbol of noble birth.

About to be devoured by the carnivorous lambskin, Clara sat motionless, a captive audience. I couldn't see her face, couldn't tell whether she was watching the performance critically. Her back expressed nothing. She was no actress, Clara the Maid.

Mother lit a cigarette—it was the first time I ever saw her smoke, she must have been doing it in hiding—and blew out a spreading cloud of white—or yellow—smoke. Smok-

ing is a vice, you dirty bitch! But Mother did it in a completely relaxed way, I had to admit. Clara's head, wreathed in smoke and wrapped in her everlasting kerchief, looked out-of-date: Clara the Servant.

"A little girl, my dear, is a sin that is paid every attention, to make sure it never turns into virtue. She is taught to hide her thoughts behind false words. Like a doll in a shop window, she learns the gestures of a ritualized imitation of life, and not life itself. She is taught to wear a certain expression: a look of perpetual surprise, always full of innocence, always hungry for rape. A consenting victim. And this is how a child is made into a well-brought up girl, as I was.

"She cuts flowers in the garden and knows how to arrange them, bakes flawless meringues, hits the right key when she plays the piano, knows her catechism by heart, plays with her champagne-colored poodle, and goes to sleep with a teddy bear in her arms. She never says the wrong thing, and the slightest unpleasant noise makes her jump. A good longterm investment.

"I don't know if you follow me, my dear, but it's simple: what would be the use of all those parlors, if we didn't create ghosts to inhabit them? Believe it or not, when I sometimes tell you to stay out of my parlor, it isn't to make you angry. Quite the contrary; it's to spare you infection. At times, I dream you're a lady, like me. And I do it just when I want to hurt you."

(Bitch, bitch, bitch!)

"A young girl, my dear, is also curiosity personified but never expressed. Sometimes it's called 'unhealthy curiosity,' a needless redundancy.

"Of course, I wouldn't want to distress you further by explaining in detail where words like 'unhealthy,' 'unclean,' 'undisciplined,' 'unsavory,' 'un-' etcetera come from. Forty years of solitude inevitably drive one to analysis, you know. 'Unhealthy' means the heart is rotten. ... I can't be more

explicit, for fear of offending you. It also means looking like one of those shiny apples that are perfect on the outside and wormy within. Eaten by a worm born with the apple that grew in ugliness as the apple grew in beauty—an effort just as authentic, natural, and certainly as creative. That is why I hate hearing the word 'unsavory' applied to the so-called negative side of human nature. Because, in spite of everything, nobody has yet dared to exclude girlhood from the state of being human, or sever the two completely."

(Too bad Clara wasn't sitting opposite the big hall mirror; I could have read her feelings on her face. Or maybe that face of hers was just a nameless surface, a deep muddy lake, revealing nothing. I wished the long monologue would give her a terrible toothache, or a look that killed, or scorn as sharp as a slap across the mouth. Clara, don't let her take you in!)

"Naturally, I am still talking about the period before I got engaged.

"To be honest, I have tried more than once to locate this particular time in my life's story, and failed. Despite the precise memories I still have from those days—they come to me every second—the period itself keeps breaking its bounds and awkwardly spilling over into my other life as a woman, from which its presence should be excluded, or better, forbidden. It is like a dog driven off by his master that comes back to bark in front of the house at two in the morning. Not to be let in—he knows his master doesn't love him—but to make his presence known. Can you imagine, my dear? Two o'clock in the morning, when sleep wraps you in safety and the world seems far away, beyond the darkness? Yet each time the master takes his gun and shoots—as is his right—the dog melts away into the darkness of the night. A wasted bullet.''

(What was she getting at, with all this self-pity?)

"My dear, a young girl is also a promise of fruitfulness— something I've never understood, she can just as well be sterile—and so she

attracts men.

“A promise of fruitfulness . . . It’s too late to be bitter, but I note that my promise has borne fruit twice: my two sons. The joys of a lifetime, you might say. In my nightmares, I sometimes relive the pain of their birth, and I realize I have never stopped asking myself 'Why?’ Realistically, though, the question doesn’t have anything to do with my own story. In the long run, it isn’t important. As a human being, procreation has made me neither richer or poorer—I mean in the sense of hope or despair. It neither enlarged nor diminished my total failure. I don’t resent my two sons. What I now call my being 'born dead’ doesn’t have anything to do with them; it’s not their fault.”

0 ?...)

"So a young girl’s whole life consists in waiting for a man. But what are these strange entities we call 'men’?

“I can tell you exactly what physical relationship they have with us. I can easily and accurately describe all the carefully controlled elements, the gestures, the words, the attitudes of their ritual pursuit, as well as all the elements beyond their control. But I still couldn’t give you the right picture. That too is a failure.

“So where do we put men in a woman’s universe, then? In thought? Impossible; it’s too minor. Not in our psychology either; the climate is distinctly incompatible. What about spiritual need? There, my dear, I can say we are completely self-sufficient!

“There simply is no place. Though disorganized, our universe is a complete one, where men are only extra elements, sicknesses grafted onto us, the better to help us die. In short, the relationship is a failure from every point of view—as we well know. That is why I said earlier that this nonsensical

'young girl’ is an excellent long-term investment. When the term is up, we know what we’re supposed to recite: 'I gave you sons.’ And I can’t stand being used so shabbily!”

(Her shout, as loud as it was unexpected, was followed by dense silence. I felt that time had stopped. At that exact instant, the special feeling I had for Mother revealed and named itself: hate. Was I only born to satisfy my father’s insane need to procreate?)

It was only long afterward, alone in a maid’s room abroad, that I gave this conversation any real thought, that I swam up the black river of my mother’s unwillingness to bear me. And I concluded that my sixteen days of blindness was something I had deliberately

chosen. I was refusing to open my eyes on a world where my place was in question. And ever since, I've lived by borrowing space from my brother Antonio, space he conquered for both of us.

(Now do you understand why I felt abandoned in an empty, nameless void, the day of our last farewell?)

"A woman, my dear, is a whole catalogue of duties with no rights at all. You may think I sound pretentious, but we always need the most complicated words to say the simplest things. Sophistication is probably an art; they say it is rooted in dialectics. But deep down I know it is rooted in despair.

"Take my appearance, for instance. I don't mean my physical appearance; I don't want to charm you. That would be unfair, and unfairness is something I will not tolerate in myself.

"You would think I had been carefully sculpted in the unattainable goal of creating the perfect woman. Everything around me falls perfectly into place. When I walk, the air gives way, offering the least resistance to my body, making graceful gestures easy. When I speak —and you've been aware of it for quite some time now—my surroundings resonate like a sounding-box, giving my words their full musical vibrancy. If I bend over a flower—flowers too are part of my

duties—its color and smell come alive to the point where the flower becomes conscious of its reason for being—which is its duty. The light softens if I open my eyes by day, and when I close them at night, the darkness deepens.

"There is nothing miraculous about any of this. It is no more than my duty as a perfect woman: wife-woman, mother-woman, support-woman for a universe selfishly created by men to satisfy their needs. And it's my duty to feel ill, physically ill, if a single one of those events doesn't occur when I appear.

"But my rights have been denied for forty years now, and I long for a cataclysm.

"There was the war, of course. A civil war, at that. Do you remember it, my dear? But the disaster that put you and my husband out of the running was a common one. Perfection was able to follow its course. The war didn't affect me. Before, during, and after it, I remained perfect.

"When the second child came—you notice I didn't say 'when I had my second child,' because I wasn't the one who had him, and he isn't mine—I thought all the elements of my personal cataclysm were at hand. Do you realize what it means to be perfect and give birth to a freak? I saw my chance to escape from the common denominator of 'nice' people, and wage my own war at last.

"I'll explain what I mean by my 'war' in a moment. First, I have to tell you that my pain was genuine, even if you don't believe me. And remember, my dear, when I say 'pain,' I'm not talking about my pain as a mother. No, I'm referring to another kind of pain, when a he dissolves spontaneously, and the truth is born. I finally had the chance to spit my truth in the world's face and launch my own personal apocalypse, my doomsday machine.

"My whole silken existence, my poise, my knowledge of music, my sublime skill at putting in just the right word at the right moment, my ease in changing moods, my elegant

way of asserting myself without ever shocking, and many other things I won't bother listing, so as not to humiliate you—all that suddenly turned to filth. Again, I want to stress that the chance to wage my holy war was within my grasp.

"By that time, as you know, my beauty was in full bloom. I had reached my final flowering, if you'll forgive me that flight of poetic fancy. Fate or nature, whichever, could not have picked a better time to sow disorder. With my blind freak, I could already see myself tirelessly and without discrimination visiting all the world's pilgrimage sites, whether consecrated to men or gods. Sanctuaries and hospitals, Holy Virgins, doctors, healers, and specialists, hot springs and wailing walls. I expected to show myself off, more beautiful than

ever, carrying an enlarged photograph of my husband, the one where his moustache juts out like a virgin forest beneath his blue eyes, and his legs, firmly planted on the ground, look as if they could hold up the world. A woman like me, a man like him, and our common fruit—a freak! Tell me, Clara, were you in love with my husband too?"

(Another pause. Mother's voice had the disturbing softness you always hear in the voices of people who know they are right. It was like hearing a judge calmly handing down a sentence without appeal, knowing no appeal is possible, revealing nothing of the nature of the crime. Whether high treason or the theft of an empty wallet, it has nothing to do with the sentence, which remains a moral act.

Listening hard, I waited for Clara's answer. Was she going to confess?

But Clara, with the wisdom of a statue, neither answered nor moved. She only had a walk-on part in this sly performance, without any lines. She was only there because in the theater, you can't talk in a vacuum. A mere presence, she stayed invisible.

THE CARNIVOROUS LAMB

Mother paused longer than before. She puffed on her cigarette, exhaled, smiled without smiling, and went on:)

"Sometimes I feel I should apologize; maybe to you, maybe to nobody in particular. Just for once, say the words 'Forgive me/ like that, into the air. Especially when I need to have some enemy, anyone, before me. That’s how I trivialize my war. It’s my pet vice, and I shouldn’t indulge it.

"Is there more to this story? I can’t remember.”

(She didn’t seem to be talking to anybody anymore, not even to herself. It was as if her thoughts had crossed a desert of weariness from which nothing escaped alive, and were fading away in the

atmosphere of the hall, as if—tired of being imprisoned in her mind—they had waited for years to disintegrate and die.

The family universe seemed to stand still; an untimely death. I had the impression that centuries were passing, that the dwarf orange tree would grow as tall as the chestnut. But I waited, patient as a snake. I knew there were still things left unsaid.)

"The rest, my dear, you know as well as I. On the sixteenth day after his birth, my freak opened his eyes and I knew my war was lost before it began.

"All during these last years, I've needed to vent my despair on someone, lancing the boil so as to drain it. I couldn't do it on the people around me: my husband, the sons I've had by him, my confessor. I needed someone else, without duties or rights. Someone who was a stranger to me, so I wouldn't risk hearing a single word of sympathy or consolation—which would have been completely useless, in any case."

(Like a shy bird, her hand took wing and gently came to rest on the paint-flecked rag wrapped around Clara's head. I thought I could sense the hesitation that went with the tenderness.)

"Dear Clara, forgive me. Before burying you in this tomb with me, I should have asked myself whether you too were haunted by despair. But when you're in pain, there isn't time to be generous. So here we are, both of us dead. Dead at last."

"Hypocrite!"

My shout rang out like a shot. Mother's hand tightened, then disappeared, yet it was still resting on Clara's head.

What was that hand still doing there, like a battered bird that had escaped the storm? The two corpses were looking at me, but I couldn't make out their faces through my tears. Why was I crying?

CHAPTER

5

W ithout arguing, Clara gave up her scraping on Mother's orders, and withdrew to her kitchen. That was her domain, she felt, so she polished it from floor to ceiling, a little more each day, and opened its two windows to the bright intensity of the garden. A miracle occurred: since it couldn't make its way into the rest of the house—except for the "other" room—the blinding light greedily surged into the kitchen with the turbulent energy of a goat-kid.

It was as if two contrary worlds of light and shadow had settled into the house, juxtaposed without nuances in Mani- chean precision. To pass from one to the other, you had to change your attitude completely. The eye that gleamed in the light suddenly appeared dull in the shadows, unable to see a complete image. And the beings and objects in the house oscillated constantly between zones of light and shadow, like planets spinning around some capricious sun.

The house itself looked like a plastic-surgery patient suddenly abandoned on the operating table because of a bomb scare: one eye squinting, the other normal, the face half smooth, half wrinkled, one lip sensuously full, the other shrunken with age. Frozen in ugliness. Unfinished in beauty. A freak.

The setting certainly suited Mother. Since her sublime confession to Clara the Priestess, she could be seen going up and down the stairs more often, silently sitting in her parlor with her tired old Chopin for company, changing her hairdo, her jewels, her dresses—always black, with yellow- white collars and cuffs—three times a day.

She seemed cheerful, unhesitatingly going to open the door when one of Father's infrequent clients rang. The door would close, there would be a moment of silence, and then:

"Good morning, senora," a note of surprise in the thin voice.

"Good morning, senor," she would say in her high, well- modulated voice, her enthusiasm perfectly feigned. "The weather is pleasant today, isn't it?"

The client, not daring to answer, would give a little nod, mutter something inaudible, and vanish into Father's study. During the few seconds that the door was ajar, you could hear the voice on the radio droning on about peace and victory as if someone were still playing the same record, obsessed with the memory of his youth despite the passage of time.

Mother's voice would run through a few notes—it was always Chopin—in the natural soprano of a canary. With a gesture of annoyance, she would take an armload of wilted flowers, abruptly throw them on the floor, as if she had forgotten about wastebaskets, and ask Clara to pick them up.

"They can't stand the heat of the house. Or maybe the air in here suffocates them. I don't care either way, you know; one should always have something to keep oneself busy. Would you give me a bottle of aspirin, my dear?" (Socially, Clara had risen a notch in Mother's eyes and vocabulary; she wasn't Clara anymore, but "my dear.") "I've heard that aspirins help flowers stay fresh longer."

Within two days, though, the flowers developed an un-

bearable migraine that made them bend their heads, as if they were looking for fresh water on the polished wood tabletop. So the whole operation would start all over again, to the relentless accompaniment of unfinished Chopin pieces.

Was Mother that capricious sun?

My brother started studying for his baccalaureate exam about then, and stopped coming home for lunch. The first day he didn't show up, I asked Clara where he was. She answered that from then on, Antonio wouldn’t be coming home at noon on weekdays.

"So he won’t eat all day long?”

"Of course not! He’ll have lunch at the school cafeteria.”

I felt a great sadness come over me. He hadn’t told me, the bastard! So I wasn’t as important to him as I had thought. Sadness.

On that very day, I finally understood that the bath my brother gave me every afternoon at exactly four o’clock wasn’t just my daily bath, strictly speaking, but a ritual strewn with caresses, ripe with still-unnamed desires.

Because the bath I got at four o’clock—or thereabouts, now—was no holiday, the way it had been when Antonio was a strong wild schoolboy, tender and silent. That first day he wasn’t there, I rejected for the first time ever the view that cleanliness was among a child’s countless natural needs, which Clara had exhaustively and painstakingly enumerated before dragging me to the bathroom. Naked in her hands, which didn’t know my body the way Antonio’s did, I made it clear that I didn’t agree one bit. Filling the whole house with my shrieks—and the bathroom with water from the tub—I managed to so exasperate Mother that she said something that would haunt my childhood dreams forever:

"Let it go, my dear. I am sure he prefers his brother’s hands.”

"That’s right, you bitch,” I thought to myself, "and

you’re the one who made me realize it.” And I was moved by the haunting beauty of being conscious of my love.

Mother didn’t add anything about "smelling sulfur/’ a comment she used to make often enough before she dumped her garbage can of old silence onto Clara’s shoulders. Now at least she kept quiet, and trotted out her watchdog look only at unexpected but infrequent moments.

And yet she remained the key to my life, the only spring where I could slake the thirst of my curiosity, just as Antonio personified the warhorse I rode into battle, giving free rein to my wildest feelings.

Antonio, my brother.

If he came home in a good mood, and told me the school gossip, I would spend a wonderful evening. Having bolted dinner, I wouldn’t put up my usual fuss about going to bed. Antonio would swing me onto his shoulders, my legs tightly gripping his neck, and we’d gallop up the stairs. Clara would have already drawn us a bath, awash with some mysterious substance that Mother bought—in London, I think —that was supposed to save us from teenage acne. My brother would undress me, without failing to linger gently over all my most sensitive places. Then he would strip, and we’d jump into the tub as if we were diving into the sea, half drowning ourselves. My muffled shrieks were perfectly discreet, never going beyond the thick bathroom walls.

Antonio was twelve years old then, and precocious in every way, as I understood later. He was big and strong, his crotch and armpits already sprinkled with hairs. Just by touching me, certain parts of his anatomy would abruptly change, and I was proud of the transformation.

He loved my pleasure, too, and taught me a sweet, terrifying game: he would hold me underwater until I was out of breath, his mouth glued to mine to keep me from suffocat-

ing. His saliva was oxygen to me, and I would swell with terror and pleasure. When he brought me back to the surface, practically unconscious in his arms, he would pretend to revive me with a

gentle, soft mouth-to-mouth that went on for long, long minutes at a time.

When we were playing, the odd silence of our games sometimes got so conspicuous that Clara would come knock on the bathroom door and startle us for a moment by asking, "Are you all right, children?" Dazed, I would look around and realize that we weren't in some dream-like corner of the earth, but in the bathroom next to our room, in Mother's house.

Calmly, Antonio would wrap both of us in the big white towel, my back snug against his stomach, kiss my neck, and say:

"Now you're going to sleep, like a good baby, aren't you?"

"I am not a baby."

"All right, but you're going to sleep just the same."

He would lay me on the bed, give me a long look—that look of my brother's that opened the door to my dreams every night—and get ready to do his homework. In a flash, he would cover his big drawing-board—off-limits to me— with books, pads, slide rules, big black cases with ivory- tipped compasses, pencils of every color imaginable, and sheets of graph paper.

The paper especially, bordered by tiny, barely visible letters and numbers, always caught my eye. After very precise and apparently exhaustive calculations, my brother would start to draw lines on its virgin surface, and giant screws, bulbs, and hammers would gradually appear, pricked with multicolored pins within circles that intersected in an incomprehensible labyrinth.

When the drawing was done, my brother would carefully

erase any extra marks, blow the rubber particles off the paper, pass his hand over it to completely sweep any imaginary flecks away, and proudly look at the result. He would take a few steps away from the table, look at the drawing from a distance, move close to look again, blow on it one last time, and carefully put away all his drawing tools in their respective cases. Then he would start his calisthenics.

Completely naked, with the big bath towel spread on the carpet to spare his skin, he would do the same exercise over and over. His long, supple muscles stood out under his skin, drops of sweat appeared on his brow and ran in salty streams down his body, and his penis would swing gaily back and forth like the clapper of a bell. After ten minutes of this, he would go back to his homework.

If by chance I was rash enough to touch the magic tools on his work table—and this happened every night—war would break out. I would get a sudden rap on my fingers with a ruler, give a muffled cry, blow on my fingers as if they were burning, and, without a sob, squeeze out two big tears that filled my eyes with fog.

"Bastard! Bastard!” I would shout. "Shithead!”

"Shithead, eh? Just wait and see what this shithead’s going to do with you!”

With one arm, Antonio would scoop me up like a bale of hay, toss me on the bed, and jump on top. Teeth clenched, I would scream that he was smothering me, the bastard, knowing full well that he always arched his body so as not to hurt me in the least. And then it was time for tickling, which I hated, or ear-sucking, which drove me wild, I loved and hated it so much.

Antonio gave me a taste for the most intense pleasure with that game. His hands tightly gripping my small waist, he would suck on my ears while I wriggled and silently screamed, begging him to stop. But he went on and on

without releasing his prey, bringing me to the brink of ecstasy. Antonio panted like an animal as I moaned his name and clawed at the nape of his neck, and the room, the night, and everything disappeared in a whirlwind of uncontrollable love. We didn't even realize when the orgasm burst out. It was a shaft of light I fell into, clinging to my brother with my arms, my legs, my nails, my teeth. And he still wouldn't let me go. He would fall asleep with his whole body on top of mine, instinctively knowing how to make me feel not his weight, but the power of his protection.

Next morning, we had to struggle to untangle ourselves. Happy as a bullock, he gave me another bath, this time strictly for hygiene's sake.

"Now you're going to eat like a big boy, aren't you, baby?" And he would kiss me on the eyes.

"Have to get our strength back." (Smiling.)

Antonio didn't need to remind me that everything that happened between us at night was a secret. He knew that a penchant for secrecy had already taken root in me. And that he himself had given it to me. Deliberately.

I can feel this wait today taking on the same dimension as my waiting for you in those years past. All my senses alert, I used to watch the hours pass without knowing their name, the way you watch your enemies pass in the street from behind a window, without being able to tell their real nature; are they policemen, or thieves?

For me, there was morning, which was long, lunch, endless, then late afternoon, which meant you were coming home soon. That hour, which I waited for like a birthday present, had a thousand names in the depths of my despair. It was called "sudden intensity of the smell of flowers that Mother set out in the parlor and the hallway," "the sleepy

blackbird’s intermittent silence in the garden/’ “turning on the light in Clara’s kitchen”—Clara the Obscure couldn’t see very well —“Father’s last client saying 'Goodnight, senora,’ ” “musical angelus of a church carillon close to the house,” (Clara’s explanation), “gurgling of my stomach, which had already digested tea” . . . “an energetic finger pushing three times on the front doorbell, hard” . . . you!

“What’s the matter with that boy? He always comes home with his pants on fire!”

(I have to say I never quite understood that phrase of Clara’s. Was it a double entendre, or just one of Clara the Peasant’s many folk expressions?)

Bowing to Mother’s ever-changing moods (she still wasn’t speaking to me), to Father’s deliberate invisibility (I could barely make out his pepper-and-salt moustache when someone opened the door to his study), and to Clara’s ceaseless prattle (so as not to seem mute, solitary Clara talked constantly), I patiently awaited the coming of that hour with the thousand names, knowing that in my life there was only room to wait for you.

And despite all these years that have gone on dying day after day, this hasn’t changed. Today, sitting in this finely woven wicker armchair—Mother’s favorite—I know that with the help of that old soap I have again become the child I was then. This ritual of waiting, which I have lived minute by minute since five o’clock in the afternoon last Friday, strikes me as completely useless. It brings me nothing new. Written in my cells when I was a child, it has ruled my behavior ever since. And my behavior has never been more than an appendage of yours, somewhat like a dog’s tail in relation to the dog.

What can I do, though? When someone else’s life is the only space you have to live in, you can’t choose but to wait.

Whether you come as a lover or an executioner, I am ready to receive you. More ready than ever. With all the ob-

ligations that waiting for you imposes on me. But don't come as a brother , to profane me in the family blasphemy; if you do, my waiting for you will assert its rights.

So open the door.

Come in.

K

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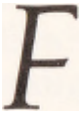
CHAPTER

6



ather’s name was Carlos.

My mouth often said the word "Father/’ especially

ATH

My

JL when talking with Clara and Antonio, but I almost never said the name "Carlos/’ or heard anyone around me say it.

And yet it’s a beautiful name.

I especially felt like saying it when I was alone, which

happened often enough. My tongue would gently press

against my lower teeth, and I could feel it starting the little trill that would give the "r” its power, but at the very last

second, my tongue would tire and soften, like a snail’s body,

and the name Carlos—Father’s name—would die away

with my desire, foreign to my voice, unsaid.

I used to hear Mother use the name from time to time, and it would make me dizzy.

"Carlos, darling, someone is here to see you."

"Have him come in."

Was it Father's voice, or Carlos's?

The dizziness became a whirlwind, a cold wave and a hot rush would rise together in my veins, and I would lose my breath. I was dazed.

All this because of Carlos's voice, which for some reason I couldn't connect with Father's. Was it because of those in-

frequent kisses he used to plant on my forehead when I was very little, and which led nowhere? Or was it the man, the man's voice, that stirred my blood, throwing me into a pit where nothing existed anymore?

My brother Antonio's voice was loud; it filled the house, broke the silence, and had the same effect on me as a bell on a trained rat. Even when it was gentle, right next to my ear, it expressed everything, hiding nothing; the voice of a boy without inhibitions. Would it sound like Carlos's voice, someday?

Carlos and Antonio.

They must have looked very much alike. Big and strong, their hair too brown, their eyes too blue, with active, restless hands that needed to give life to everything they touched.

Only their voices were different, as if the laws of heredity had been suspended. But that could change. And one of these days, I might finally hear Carlos's voice speaking to me. (Maybe one of these days, too, Antonio would have Carlos's moustache, a dark forest that made you want to approach the full lips and dominating teeth blindly.)

A spy in spite of myself—if I had been raised differently, would I have still had this irresistible taste for voyeurism?— hidden by the dwarf orange-tree, the sofas, or the large plants that filled the hallway and Mother’s parlor, I tried to pierce the mystery behind Father's closed study door every time I could. A smooth wooden door, like all the others in the house, it didn’t yield to the eye, and smothered Carlos's voice with the finality of the grave.

The other voice, the one on the radio, could neither break the silence imposed by the door nor invade the house, though that was certainly its goal. Unfortunately, it only penetrated Father's conscience, who then stopped being Carlos ... at least as long as the damned voice talked on and on about victory and peace.

With Father hidden, Mother distant, Clara exhausted,

Antonio carefree and in love, Carlos non-existent, who could I turn to, to ask who that invisible, driven person was, talking on the radio about victory and peace?

At times, pricking up my ears in the midst of silence, I would strain to hear even imaginary artillery shelling outside, in town, or ransack my short memory for an image of the rumble of war, so as to put those words, “peace” and “victory,” in their proper place in the reality of the present. But the silence imposed its constant stillness, and my memory remained blank. So where was the radio voice’s paranoid insistence coming from? From the past? The future? Was it some chronic disease that couldn’t be cured? On the rare occasions when Father’s study door opened, why was it that Carlos’s voice remained silent, while the radio went on and on, without ever tiring?

Above all, why didn’t Father just smash the fucking radio that was smothering his voice—Carlos’s voice—once and for all, and just start talking, himself, Carlos, and fill the void where we were all rotting?

If Carlos’s voice had said, “Good morning, Clara,” the very wrinkles would have fallen from her face. Had Clara, tiny, shriveled-up Clara,

been in love with Carlos? Mother had asked her point-blank, and Clara the Secret never answered.

A closed door, made of perfectly innocent wood. A door that always separated me from Father, removed me forever from Carlos. A door of mystery.

Piercing that mystery became my obsession. Whenever Antonio was out of the house and his absence left me hanging in emptiness, I would constantly watch the obsessive rectangle of wood that enclosed Father's presence twenty-four hours a day.

At times—at the precise hours when Clara the Faithful brought Carlos his breakfast, his tea, or two egg yolks beaten

into a glass of red wine—a furtive, deliberately neutral breath of air would slip out through the narrow crack of the door like someone tiptoeing out of jail. The breath of air, charged with Carlos's vibrations, seemed to expand in the hall and then run right to the freedom of the garden, climb the walls, and go . . . where?

So as not to drive what remained of the ghost away too soon, I would emerge from my hiding-place and gently slip into the cloud of cigar-smell, bathing in it, body and soul open, trying to take it all in. I would fill my lungs with that healthful air, my lungs opening like eyes seeing beauty for the first time and staring at it for a long, long time. A feeling like an orgasm would search out the deepest part of my body with its thousands of brazen, subtle, knowing fingers.

When I came to, the door would be closed, ironically watching me. The daily flowers' heavy smell had taken over the hall again, and yellowed Chopin would once again be pounding at my eardrums. Mother was imposing herself, as usual. Her tomb became her tomb again, and only the usual smell of its decay remained.

One day when I was about ten, I happened to be home alone. Antonio wasn't back from school yet, and Clara had left after lunch, probably to go shopping. Mother was taking a nap, and a sort of

cease-fire reigned in the house. Nothing stirred on the second floor, and I left my room to take a look in the hallway and the stairs, half expecting to find the silence out for a leisurely stroll. Maybe it was looking at itself in the mirrors, certain it wouldn't be caught. But nobody was there, not even a ghost.

I went downstairs and inspected the hallway. Nobody there either. The parlor was empty, the piano silent. Not a soul in the kitchen. A soft fall breeze swept the garden, timidly lifting the few dead leaves that had escaped Clara's broom (Clara the Compulsive). The green of the jasmine

thicket loomed darker against the wall's shadow, and the blackbird was staring at the sun shining on the house, his closed yellow beak pointed toward the window of our room.

It seemed to me that everything , both living and dead, had deserted the house, and I was unexpectedly trapped there, a prisoner of non-time, of non-existence.

Panic seized me. I went into the kitchen and turned on the faucets, hoping to feel a living element close to me. But the water wasn't running; it must have been shut off. Switching the lights on wouldn't change anything: the sun was already streaming into the kitchen, so I didn't bother. I practically ran from the kitchen to the garden and whistled for the blackbird, first softly, then as loud as I could, but he didn't bother answering me, as he always had before, ever since we were both little. A stone bird.

What was I to do? Call the neighbors? That wouldn't help, I didn't know them. Worse, I wasn't even sure we had any. I had the feeling of living alone in an isolated, imaginary family, in an isolated, imaginary house, in the middle of an isolated, imaginary town, in a country . . . oh, forget it.

What if I ran into the house shouting ''Mama!" for the first time in my life? Was it possible that some scrap of maternal instinct, asleep

forever in Mother’s closed heart, would suddenly awake and answer, 'Tes, darling?”

I was on the point of doing it, the shout already filling my mouth, when reality hit me, and I choked back my unborn shout with disgust, the way you swallow castor oil. Snared in the swamps of her nap, Mother wasn’t about to leave the anguish of her nightmares to come soothe my heightened despair.

So I was forced to get used to all that emptiness willy- nilly, just as I had already gotten used to all the rest of the emptiness of my existence. Alone in company or alone without anyone, what difference would it make to the essence of my aloneness? Someday, all the ghosts that surrounded me

would leave for good. The sooner I got used to that, the better.

Very gently, like a dried-up spring coming to life after the first rains, my blood started pulsing through my veins again, a miracle of calm. Feeling resigned, they way you do when you go to sleep again after waking from a bad dream, I went back inside to the same atmosphere as always. What doesn’t kill us strengthens us (one of Clara’s proverbs). Of necessity, I was getting cynical.

At that very moment, someone rang the front doorbell. The ring was so loud, and spread so slowly through the silent house, that everything around me suddenly started to tremble, as if shaken by an earthquake. Or was I the only one trembling?

Imbalance returned. The light fled the hallway, and the wilted flowers spat out their cloying perfume, they way they did whenever something out of the ordinary happened. I watched the parlor door, expecting to see Mother’s yellowish hands appear like blind puppets, but it occurred to me that the parlor had been empty before. I looked at the stairs, and was painfully surprised to see no ghost sliding down the steps. No help from that quarter. Everybody must have left.

Maybe a lunatic was on the loose—not as far-fetched as all that—and the whole family had run away in a panic.

The doorbell rang again, more insistently this time. My gaze unconsciously went to the heavy, closed door to Father's study, but it didn't stir either. Our room was empty, the kitchen was empty, the garden was empty.

I made a decision that day, for the first time in my life; I had to, of course, but it was a decision just the same. I walked to the front door and opened it with my own hands, using my own strength. Turning the handle, I said to myself, "You're doing this of your own free will. All alone. Nobody told you to." Drunk with this sudden freedom of action, I boldly looked over the person standing stiffly on the

front steps. It was a man, wearing a cheap, worn, grease- stained suit. The light was behind him, so I couldn't make out much of his face, but his eyes were as poor, worn, and stained with bitterness as his suit, and just as black.

To repeat: the first time I looked at the outside world by an act of my own will, it was through the screen of this misery in man's shape, coming to call on my father.

"Don Carlos?" (Meaning Father.)

The voice gave the impression that the poverty and misery of the man's exterior were even deeper and more unbearable for his soul; a post-war ruin, a bombed-out house, a scorched facade with an empty window and a well in the courtyard caved in by shelling, its water gone bad.

After scrutinizing the man and deciding I had learned all I could from him, I shamelessly looked into the street. After all, this man came from the street; what else could it engender? I saw a fancy car drive by. And I said to myself, "Outside, things aren't the same."

"Don Carlos?”

"Come in . . . please.” (I added "please” because I felt a sudden tenderness for the man’s poverty, and wanted to show him some consideration.)

The man smiled—what a joyless smile!—and followed me into the hallway. On purpose, I left the front door wide open. A strong draft that seemed to have been hiding somewhere, biding its time, started to blow between the street and the garden. The blackbird let out a terrified squawk, also for the first time in his life. (I didn’t give a damn.)

Without any discreet knock of warning, which Mother and Clara always gave, I opened the door to Father’s study—it seemed to resist me fiercely—and walked into the room.

"Father, there’s a gentleman to see you,” I said.

Father looked at me, without at first realizing that I was

the one announcing the caller, and answered automatically, "Have him come in/'

His moustache trembled for a second—Mother may have known its storms—but I backed away before any reaction appeared on his face, showed the visitor in, and closed the door behind him.

So there I was in the hallway again, amid the velvet and the lace curtains I was also seeing for the first time, flapping wildly in the draft from the street. I had been acting on my own for some time now, behaving like someone who was exercising his willpower without constraint. My throat tightened at the novel feeling of freedom—an element foreign to my life.

I walked toward the front door, went down the steps, touched the heavy, carved-wood outer gate, as high and wide as a church's, and looked out into the street. In front of me. To my right. To my left.

It was siesta time, and except for a dog and two passersby, the street was empty. The shops were closed. The church was silent; an old woman in black and a priest, also in black, popped out of a small door in the main gate, one after the other. Atop a house—though it didn't look like a public building—a red-yellow-red flag waved heavily in the air, and a few dead leaves tried to keep from drowning in the dust on the ground, skittering along like unfledged chicks.

I felt let down. "There's nothing very special about the street," I said to myself. "Or maybe this just isn't the right time. Oh well." I went back inside and closed the door behind me.

That first experience of freedom had turned out to be pretty disappointing. I ran a neutral look over my everyday hallway. Nothing had changed. Or had it? Hang on a second. Take a breath. There, what do you smell now? Or rather, what don’t you smell anymore? My God! The

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Mother-smell, it’s disappeared, swept out by the draft! Yippee!

I sat down on the church pew against the wall next to the parlor, and deliberately stepped on the little carnivorous lambskin, kicking it with my polished shoe to annoy it.

“See that, pal? All you have to do is open the door, and everything changes/'

But the little lambskin kept silent; it didn’t seem inclined to swallow the elegant foot that was teasing it. Siesta time must be a narcotic that affects even things that never sleep.

And yet that draft, so foreign to the usual atmosphere of the house, should have jolted everything awake. The house itself, unused to antibiotics, should have been stirring— shrinking or swelling, draining its abscesses, getting its blood moving at least. But none of that happened, at least not to the extent I expected.

I finally decided that the house had been built around a pustule of silence existing from the beginning of time, and that my ancestors had moved in without fighting it. Who knows, maybe they liked it, the way a leech settles into the swampy water where the summer goats come to drink.

As I was thinking this, Father's study door opened, and the client came out, closing it behind him. I got up, more out of respect than from any wish to see him out, but he abruptly turned back and opened the door again. His voice was so soft and timid, I couldn't hear the question he asked, but I could distinctly hear Carlos's deep, resonant voice answer:

"Next week. Tuesday. Don't come back before then."

Embarrassed, the client nodded and fled down the hallway, forgetting to close the study door. He disappeared, anonymous in his worn, black, shabby, grease-stained suit.

Holding my breath, I stared at the study door. In a second, Carlos would get up and close it. Would he take a look

into the hallway, and see me? No, nothing. The door hung open, and the minutes seemed an eternity. I made up my mind—this was definitely a day for decisions—and came close to the door, fascinated by the Carlos-Father mystery. The cigar smell stopped me in my tracks, the way the smell of incense stops the nonbeliever at the church door. Too bad: a fearless explorer, I overcame the obstacle.

My small person, completely excluded from conscious activity, stood motionless on the dark red rug of Father's study. Out of the corner of my eye, I made an inventory of the room: red curtains that matched the rug, drawn completely across the windows; a maroon armchair that looked a hundred years old—and may have been; thousands of books on shelves covering the walls from floor to ceiling—did Carlos

have time to read them all? He must have been a fountain of knowledge. No flowers. No vases. A bronze horse, rearing on the leather-covered desk.

And there, lording it on a high table across from Father, was Carlos's executioner, silent, perhaps stilled at last: an old radio with light wooden latticework, its knobs shiny with use, as big as it was ugly. Not a knick-knack, not an ashtray had been casually set down on it, the way it might have been on any other piece of furniture. It stood alone, a god without a trinity on its unitary altar. It stood out from the rest of the decor, imposing its presence. The room wasn't designed for it, but it reigned there all the same. It governed Carlos's thinking and his slow dying. Father's eyes saw no other landscape, no sun, no star, no horizon. And as it talked, the slow seep of despair poisoned my father's blood.

Aside from that, I felt a joyful warmth in my crotch when I noticed that Mother's presence was banished from the room: her photo, whether framed in silver, wood, or ivory, was nowhere to be seen. But it didn't last: a small embroidered square covering the back of a chair caught my eye.

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The bitch! Even here, you could find traces of her hypocritical, ladylike attentions. "A young girl, my dear . . Her hand had profaned this masculine sanctuary forever.

I had been standing there for two long, thoughtful minutes, trying to make out whether the man sitting at his desk, his eyes lost in the papers he seemed to be studying carefully, was Father or Carlos. Or was he both of them, blended by time's decay? True, the gray of age was already creeping into his moustache and onto his temples, but I stubbornly told myself that it wasn't age at all, just an old weariness that dulled the luster of his black hair.

Holding my breath, I tried not to make a sound. I would have liked to stay like that forever, watching death progressing step by step, so as

to lift this strange heaviness born of disappointment and failure from my chest. Wouldn't his son's presence make Father look up, like a dog who hears his master whistle? Wouldn't my presence force Carlos to stare at me?

At last he raised his head and saw me. Father? Carlos? Doubt eddied in my veins, cut the strength from my legs. But it was Father who was looking at me, his too-blue eyes drowned in surprise.

"What the . . ."

He didn't finish his sentence.

"Isn't anyone home?"

"No."

Silence.

"Do you feel lonely?"

I didn't answer. What could I have told him of my loneliness?

"Do you ... do you want to stay here, with me?"

"If you like."

Silence.

"You could look at my books . . . and keep me company too, of course. I don't feel like working today."

"I don't know how to read yet."

(There, I was lying. With a lover’s patience, my brother had taught me to read and write, but we had decided to keep it a secret. Antonio behaved like Pygmalion with me, and I owe him almost everything I know. At times, in bursts of passion, words I never learned come out of my mouth, mispronounced but weighted with experience. Burning like a torch, my brother used to correct me with his teeth, blowing the right pronunciation down my throat, wet with saliva, cut with spasms. He said that what you learn in bed, you never forget. That’s why he was always very careful not to make any mistakes in his lessons.)

"I don’t know how to read yet . . .’’

I repeated the words, my voice full of reproach. I had come in to find Carlos, and here I was making Father feel guilty. I took a legitimate pleasure in it, which could be seen on my face, as calm as a judge in love with justice (why always this image of a judge?). A kind of light seemed to go out in Father’s eyes, but he didn’t say anything. He came over to me, and his big strong hand—"Carlos, come!’’ shouted my instinct—swam like a fiery fish in my blond hair. It lingered there, his fingers sketching a slow caress. I felt filled by a hot madness, my eyes brimmed with tears, I couldn’t breathe in the study’s air . . . what was happening to me?

Father bent down to me, his lips ready to plant a kiss on my forehead, a distant father coming from some past lost since the first days of my existence.

Suddenly I could feel his breath, smelling of cigars, enveloping me. I abruptly raised my head, and savagely glued my mouth to his, smothering in the bushy pepper-and-salt of his moustache. Astonished, he opened his lips, and I sucked his tongue greedily, as if I were breathing in life itself. A rush of saliva filled my mouth. . . . That was Carlos, causing that sweet flow of glandular secretion. He realized that at my

touch an old desire was starting to rise in him. Had my lips inherited the soft wetness of Mother's when she was a girl?

I escaped before Carlos had time to react, and ran up to our room. His dazed look was all I remembered.

With my back against the door, as if to keep out the immediacy of those memories running along the stairs and the hall behind me, I could hear the radio start blaring about peace and victory. So Father had stayed in his grave after all. And Carlos with him.

That night, my brother's caresses had trouble erasing the unexpected meeting with Carlos from my spirit. For hours afterward, I had the feeling that I was bald, having left my blond hair between his clenched fingers. I knew that Carlos knew. And I felt an understandable feeling of triumph. I took advantage of every time my brother tickled me to burst out in helpless laughter. . . thinking that this was one victory that the radio killing my father would never mention. Bitch of a radio!

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CHAPTERS

8

J wasn’t a child anymore, even if I looked like one, being slim and small. At home, of course, they still said "the child,” when referring to my person—to the extent that they considered me to be a person at all, which I doubt.

To Clara, I was "that. . . child,” with an adjective that depended on her mood. To my brother Antonio, I didn’t even have a name: it was "my baby.” To Mother I was surely "that freak,” and to Father... no idea. But I wasn’t a child anymore.

My brother was the one who pushed me over the line between childhood and puberty. His fingers and lips lingered so often over the details of my anatomy that he wound up making me curious about my body. Through him, I discovered mirrors.

The first time I looked at myself in a mirror, trying to see not my own image, but the one my brother had of me, I was surprised and embarrassed. Though noticing the various ways my small person had changed made me feel shy, my look immediately turned to contemplation. I was trying to understand why most of my brother’s caresses always went to certain well-defined parts of my body. (Undeniably accurate, he never made a mistake, even in the dark.) And I un-

derstood: my body had the fleeting beauty of an evanescent work of art. Maybe that was why Antonio held it in his arms so tightly.

Continuing my discoveries, I asked Clara to clean the wardrobe mirror carefully, and learned how to place my brother’s desk lamp so

that it would light up my profile to good advantage when I looked at myself naked in the mirror. It might have seemed narcissistic, except that I was seeing what my brother saw. It was a beautiful and tender sight that stirred the body and tempted the soul.

I no longer had any trouble understanding the softness of my brother's look, and the ever stronger, fiercer desire I felt to melt into him. With me, he acted like a creator. He sensed—no, he was sure—that he was shaping me day by day into the image of something special that he loved unconsciously. And passionately.

He was the first to discover the few tiny blond hairs that were starting to grow under my armpits. He also pointed out that my penis was pink, and his was dark brown. Just between us, there were some other basic differences I didn't mention: our respective ages, my slimness and his husky build. I didn't want him to get too vain. In any case, he wasn't shy about showing all this off to me, and when I had the sight of him in front of me, I couldn't take my eyes away. I was delighted to be playing a central part in this grand unfolding of beauty.

Just the same, my brother neglected neither his studies nor my education. From natural science, we went on to caresses, from breathlessness to multiplication. Never will I be able to untangle eroticism from the earliest things I learned. Two times two is four kisses, and so forth. He always found imaginative ways of putting whatever he wanted to teach me into practice on my sensual body, from geography to grammar. He would place Cape Finisterre on my right nipple, for example; his lips would gently slide down to

my navel—Madrid—and then to the right side of my groin, where Gibraltar was. "T" was a dental consonant; his tongue showed me exactly where in my mouth I had to press my tongue to fully grasp the mechanics of pronunciation.

As long as my body is alive, I will remember that heap of nonsense we call general knowledge with delight. And the day Antonio dies for good, my knowledge will die with him. A double funeral.

One afternoon, Father and Mother sat down together in her parlor—and not by accident, I think. It was a Sunday, I can't remember what time of year. My brother had gone off to play a junior varsity soccer match, and I was in our room, clumsily trying to sketch the way he looked, a dark god waving his arms, fierce as any good Andalusian, running after the ball. Unsatisfied with my artistic efforts, I tore up the sketch and went out into the hall. There, as always: silence. I don't know whether I should add that it was oppressive. I already seem to have used up all the ways of characterizing that silence, certainly the most noteworthy aspect of the mood of the house.

I went downstairs aimlessly, with nowhere to go but the garden, naturally, and no one to talk to but the blackbird. Nothing much out of the ordinary was in the air.

As I crossed the hall, I caught sight of Clara coming out of her kitchen carrying the coffee service on a tray. It was the silver service, in fact. I noticed there were two cups, and realized right away that Mother had company.

That was an extraordinary event, of course. Since her senor dressmaker's death, Mother saw no one, except for her confessor, who came twice a year.

My curiosity, like a sleeping volcano, abruptly came to life.

Mother hadn't bothered me for a very long time, and had taken second billing to my new-found passion for Carlos.

But here she was in the news again. I simply had to know who she was with, what she was talking about. (Probably in the form of a long monologue, as usual.)

Unfortunately, I was no longer small enough to slip into the parlor and hide behind the big sofa Mother would certainly be stretched out on. But there were always the French doors to the garden, with the broken windowpane, so I went outside. The blackbird greeted me with a few sporadic chirps, but I didn't answer; I still bore him a

grudge from the day I had been so completely alone, and besides, 1 wanted to keep my presence secret. I stood behind the big moss-covered stone bowl next to the French doors at the height of the broken window, and looked eagerly into the parlor. Mother's visitor turned out to be—Father.

That day was the first time in my life that I saw Father and Mother as a couple; in other words, as my parents. A day of discovery.

I had been wrong, earlier, when I had tried to imagine the scene. Mother was on the sofa, all right, but not stretched out. She was sitting stiffly on its edge, knees together, apparently calm, as polished and perfect as a hothouse plant. She was serving the coffee with detachment, as if her hands weren't connected to her body but belonged to some other world.

Mother was speaking. Her tone and her very words were classically perfect, like a studio recording, undisturbed by the clamor of life.

"Darling, are you sure you aren't reproaching me?"

When Mother handed him his cup of coffee, Father didn't know what to do with his cigar. He needed three hands, the poor man. Mother took the cigar from him and set it on a crystal Murano ashtray decorated with a pale mauve lotus; the catalogue probably didn't have it in yellow. The smile that had accompanied the word "reproaching"

was taking forever to leave Mother's lips, but you could tell she was straining to avoid any imbalance between her words and her gestures. "A young girl, my dear . .

"I think we ought to talk about it. We have responsibilities, and we haven't lived up to them, it seems to me."

Nothing ruffled the quiet of the air, scented with yellow hyacinths. (A specialty of Mother's florist; at her insistence, he had managed the hybrid marvelously.) Two perfect fingers picked up a yellow sugar

cube, which the coffee’s revolting blackness swallowed. A gilded silver spoon gently started stirring.

"Yes, that’s true. Or at least we should have them. Only, I wonder if it is worth the trouble.”

"What do you mean, worth the trouble, Matilde? He’s our son.”

Father had just said the word "son.” A wave of warmth flowed through the hole in the window, and I avidly breathed it in. It warmed my heart, even if he was referring to my brother, and not to me.

Mother stared straight at Father. I can’t begin to describe her surprise. It was as if she were wondering why her husband had suddenly taken to speaking Chinese on this quiet afternoon. And especially without warning her. The perfection of her surroundings blushed with shame.

"Who could deny it? I don’t want to go over all that again. Let’s assume, in fact, that he is our son. What is he complaining about? I am spending my entire fortune for his comfort. He is living in luxury.”

"Still, we’re neglecting his education.”

"Oh, that.”

(Aside from her not loving me, had she herself been so perfectly educated that she was unwilling to subject me to the same torture? I have wondered about that at times, but never cared to think her so generous.)

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"He doesn’t even know how to read.”

Like a cobra’s hood, Mother’s eyes widened. "Who told you that?”

"He did. I offered him my books, and he answered that he didn’t know how to read.” (So he really was thinking of me when he said

"my son.” The warmth returned.) "I pay so little attention to things that it didn’t strike me as strange. But right afterward, when I thought about it, I thought I’d die of shame.”

Mother burst out laughing. Caught unaware, the parlor seemed blinded by this sudden burst of light, and I expected to hear the piano, inspired, start playing of its own accord.

Father, though, wasn’t surprised. Was this flower of harmony Mother’s laugh when she was a young girl? Did it blossom this gloriously, with a kind of brazen shame, at the sound of certain daring words that came to life in the vicinity of his moustache?

" 'Die of shame’? That’s lovely, but forgive me, darling, I hardly recognize this kind of talk. You seem to have changed your style. Before, you were more . . . abrupt. And therefore more reassuring. Tell me, did you go up to the other room?”

Father didn’t answer right away. Obviously, the idea of going up to the "other room” had never occurred to him.

"No, he came into my study. Just like that, all of a sudden.”

"He dared ...” A tone of measured surprise. "Well, he’s getting older. One of these days, he will call us to account. It may be his right.”

"That’s beside the point, Matilde. I know you didn’t want to have that child, but ...”

I am sure I knew what Mother was going to say next, but her sudden violence took me aback.

"You don’t know anything about it!” (Try to stay calm, darling, no need to start shouting over a little family conver-

sation.) "Wanted or not isn’t the question anymore. He was a disappointment to me, that’s all.”

"But darling, be reasonable! It isn't his fault that he isn't a freak. You're going to drive me crazy with that business!"

"His fault! I've given up trying to find out whose fault it was." (Let's add just the right note of sarcasm so it rings true. Only Mother's sarcasm was like gourmet seasoning.)

The scene was so absurd, I couldn't believe my eyes or my ears. You would think it had been rehearsed thousands of times before being played out in front of me. Truth wasn't the point. Neither was reality, obvious though it may have been. Mother and Father were there, and to all appearances they were talking about me. But neither they nor I were involved. It was the wrong scene, the wrong actors, the wrong characters, even the wrong subject. Or everything at once. I could have opened the French doors, walked into the parlor, sat down on the sofa, had a cup of coffee (or had Clara fixed me a cup of cocoa, for just that eventuality?), and told them, "You're talking bullshit!" as calmly as that. But that wouldn't have been part of the play either, obviously, and someone else—the blackbird, maybe—might have thought that I wasn't really in character either.

Ostentatiously, Mother lit a cigarette. It struck me as a daring gesture, made for Father's benefit, vaguely denoting a certain youthfulness of spirit. But I may be going too far back in my memory, and the feeling of daring could be a mistaken impression.

Mother went on: "In any case, he's lying."

This is high melodrama, my dear blackbird. Give a whistle! The line deserves applause.

Bad acting has its rewards: Father raised his eyebrows. In surprise, I might add.

"What do you mean, he's lying?"

"Your son Antonio is teaching him all sorts of things in the other room. Maybe more than he should."

(Shit! So I’m not the only spy in the house.)

“What can he be teaching him? He doesn't think of anything but his calisthenics."

“How to read and write, for one thing. They’re always together. They are the only family unit in this house, the only couple . . . with all that entails."

Staring at Mother, Father’s mouth dropped open. His hand and cigar stopped dead, somewhere in mid-air.

“I don’t understand what you mean."

“You don’t have to."

A long pause, broken when Father coughed to clear his throat.

“Matilde, what you’re saying there . . .’’

He stopped, choosing his words carefully, and I thought I could see a glint of terror in Mother’s eyes. Or was I dreaming? At the same time, my mouth moistened at the memory of Carlos’s lips and the stiffness of his moustache, that day in Father’s study. But the front doorbell rang, and Mother cut in:

“That must be for you, darling. We’ll decide tonight."

Mother got up, her hands already busy letting down her hair, as if she were getting ready for bed. The mood in the parlor was suddenly infected with the terrible vagueness that trailed Mother everywhere like her shadow. Father, who must have known the story, went out. End of Act One. Curtain.

It hadn’t gone too badly. With Mother, you couldn’t ever count on lightning striking. Everything about her was sordid, but with a touch of elegance. Her cataclysms, always unfinished, had a musical rhythm. Her upbringing would never allow even metaphorical bloodshed. Carlos must have gone soft, bathing in that spiritual

moistness. He was lost forever. In the past, his voice must have bowled over all of Mother’s artificial harmonies and made thunderclaps envious (I imagine). But now his too-blue eyes, his big, strong

hands, and his aggressive moustache were just archaic vestiges of a species that had long since become extinct these last twenty-five years—twenty-five centuries—since the end of the civil war. The voice on the radio, with its dreary speeches about peace and victory, was like alcohol in a jar, designed only to keep the specimen alive, so as to have a faithful listener. But dirty, tangled feathers covered the body I could see trapped in an atmosphere so heavy it was impossible to fly. Carlos was done for.

The fluted edge of the stone bowl was hurting my back, and I squeezed down. Not wanting my disappointment to be ironically reflected back at me, I didn't dare meet the blackbird’s glassy eye and missionary gaze. I left the garden and skirted the open kitchen door, for fear Clara would spot me and offer me her same old snack of hot cocoa and cookies.

I went upstairs to the "other room,” and stretched out on the bed. So now, for the first time in ten years, Father was concerned about my education. They had all been too busy before, glorifying and destroying themselves over the civil war. In terms of spiritual damage, you could say the goddamned war still wasn’t over. In my case, though, it was too late for education. My mind had enjoyed the freedom of solitude and the isolation of thought far too long. It already knew what it had to destroy. At any cost.

A few days later, a private tutor named don Pepe started coming to the house four hours a day, including Saturdays, and I heard him tell Mother he would help me make up for the time lost. It seemed I was to be ready to start high school in two years at the latest. I think the idea was to have me prepare for the baccalaureate exam, like my brother Antonio.

"It won’t be easy,” he added. "But don’t worry, senora, lost causes are my specialty.”

Which was my case, as he saw it.

An odd image came to mind, I remember: I was stretched out on a platter—surrounded by lemon peels and sprinkled with parsley, a garlic clove between my teeth—which was carried by don Pepe dressed up like a chef, and I was being presented to a panel of five fat teachers in the high school exam room for their approval. A day of glory for don Pepe, rather than for me.

Mother had Clara dress me up like little Lord Faunt- leroy—or very nearly—douse me, just this once, with French cologne, and bring me to the parlor. There were fresh flowers—hot Andalusian flowers—in the vases, and their perfume, mixed with the smoke from Mother’s cigarettes, was making the air thick. My entrance on a wave of Guerlain and Clara’s smell of cooking and laundry finished stinking up the room completely.

Out of courtesy toward don Pepe, Mother was forced to open the French doors a crack. This was a concession she didn’t even make to her confessor, who smelled of incense and wax mingled with sweat and the special stink of men who never wash more than their faces. Mother used to faint twice a year, on the days of her general confession.

She made the necessary introductions:

"Your teacher, don Pepe.”

I bowed my head, and before I could raise it, Mother’s slender hand seized the back of my neck like a claw. "My son,” she said.

I couldn’t see what don Pepe was doing. In any case, I was too electrified by this sudden touch of Mother’s hand, her very flesh, which had never so much as brushed me before, and by hearing her say, "My son.” Everybody was claiming my parenthood, these days.

If I had had Mother's weakness for rhetoric, I would have pronounced it a cataclysm right away, but the shock was too great to be defined one way or the other.

Later on, I often thought that hostilities broke out and

war was declared right then and there. From that moment on, and for the next two years, my relationship with don Pepe wasn't what you would normally call friendly. To train me, he used a fiendishly carved palm-wood cane; to humiliate him, I kept everything he taught me to myself, without ever deigning to answer a single one of his questions. Some lost causes can't be redeemed, even by a specialist.

Four hours of war every day for two years strengthens a person's character; mine was no exception.

Don Pepe was naturally cut out for education as it is understood in Spain, namely, that all children are brutes until proved otherwise. And the contrary never has been proved, judging by how fiercely Spanish teachers cling to their notion of discipline. A child is to be cooked over a slow fire, without pity, without letup, until the dumb beast within gives way to the person he is to become. Of course the beast doesn't always feel like leaving, which would make the job easier—that's a fundamental principle—so warfare is obviously called for.

This was a method don Pepe pushed to extremes, and only my moments of weakness ever gave him reason to smile. But when I saw him smiling, my beast would awaken with a vengeance, I would grit my teeth and become dumber still. Over the long run, his smile started to fade— working without a break wears anyone out—and finally disappeared. At that point, sarcasm, a gift I inherited from Mother, started to gleam in my eyes, and—in my highly prejudiced opinion—he could no longer stand to have me look him in the face.

Born into a republican family—in Spain we say "Red," to avoid confusion—don Pepe hadn't been able to go into public education, once Fascism raised its flag over the country. Choosing to ignore the fact that his methods were just as fascistic as theirs, the gentlemen of the Ministry of National Education had blocked his way, and don Pepe, a born

teacher, had turned to private tutoring, specializing in "difficult cases," namely me.

"One of these days," he would say, poking me in the back with his pointed cane, "Til manage to split your head open like a pomegranate and stuff it with a good part of what I know. And on that day, my angel, I will feel proud to have met you."

He would talk about "our meeting" as if it had been ordained by fate. He was quick to forget that with a reputation like his there wasn't any such thing as fate. I had almost reached puberty, and as far as anyone knew, still couldn't read or write. That state of affairs called for a specialist. And that was what he unblushingly called "our meeting."

Mother turned over her parlor to our two-man war—it was a gesture—though the addition of a blackboard and pine bookcase marred the room's somewhat affected elegance. From one day to the next I found myself buried under tons of books, texts, and notepads that Mother bought in a flurry of telephone calls, without regard to price or subject, and—needless to say—without consulting "the specialist." Whenever a new package arrived, he would merely open it, take a look, and say, "That'll do." As for Mother, she was delighted. Since her conversation with Father, she had surely gotten it into her head to be useful to me. Or at least to prove my complete uselessness once and for all.

In the parlor, the usual blend of scents from Mother's life were now joined by the smells of chalk, which stuck to your throat as tenaciously as a tick, ink, paper, and don Pepe's sweat and breath; he stank of sour wine as strongly as any Paris bum. As a result,

once class was over, Clara would open the parlor's French doors wide, to let in some air from the garden. An atomizer suddenly appeared in Mother's hand which she used as mechanically as a bathroom attendant, all the while asking the senor professor (Clara was told

not to call him anything but that) if the class had gone as he wished, and whether I wasn't being too hard-headed.

"It's going like clockwork, senora," a satisfied don Pepe would reply.

Mother was able to infuse her daily "Oh, good," with a charming note of surprise. I had no idea what was going on.

At the end of our four hours of daily warfare—hot or cold, depending on how inclined don Pepe was to use his palm-wood cane—senoi the specialist in lost causes was never quite ready to raise anchor. Mother's conversation was music to his ears, he would insist, and so managed to have himself served an excellent tea nearly every day, fixed at top speed by Clara, and washed down by the magnificent wines from Mother's full cellars; his weakness for them was growing daily, he said.

"You're going to turn me into a shameless drunkard, senora," he would say every five minutes. "If I believed in God, I would ask Him to take you to task."

With a tear in an eye that had hardened into dull hypocrisy, and talking like a truck driver, don Pepe would then launch into his legendary anticlericalism. ("Legendary" was the word he used, but I was in no position to say how true that was). He would discourse at length on the holy war that would someday have to be declared against the Roman Catholic Church, which was running a monopoly on God's image at our expense.

"Hucksters, senora, hucksters! They sell religion the way you sell soap. And the way things are going, it’s turning into a black market. Every time you turn around, you need some certificate proving

you've been baptized, taken communion, or been confirmed. Some damned piece of paper signed by some damned priest. Do you practice, senora?"

Mother put on her most wonderful smile, and replied, "Let's just say I have certain leanings. But nothing serious."

Right away, the conversation switched to the need to give

children, at any rate, a certain religious upbringing. Mother loved that expression; it didn't pin down her thinking, while keeping her ideas safe from any criticism.

I put away my textbooks, pads, and pencils, with the healthy notion of getting out of there as fast as I could, but Mother caught my hand and said, "Don't leave right away, darling. You have to get used to making conversation. A little social life never hurt anyone."

Don Pepe nodded, though I don't think he had the least inclination to deal with me socially. At a loss, I picked up the eraser and was about to wipe the blackboard when Mother cut in:

"Leave that for Clara. The chalk dust will spoil your clothes, and they're very expensive."

To don Pepe: "Our fortune isn't what it once was."

"Ah yes, senora," Don Pepe tactfully acquiesced. "Everything has changed, these days. Unfortunately, what some of the rich have lost under the present regime hasn't gone to the people."

He would then leave his wine glass untouched on the table for a few seconds, so as not to give the impression that he didn't give a damn about Mother's economic distress. The few seconds of silent mourning began to lengthen, and Mother hastened to refill senor professor's glass, to keep the awkward silence from settling in, as it seemed inclined to do.

"Have another drop, my friend. I can't keep you company, because of my health, but believe me, I enjoying seeing that others aren't forced to pass up life's meager pleasures."

With a few small smiles and cat-stretches, she would settle herself more comfortably on the sofa. If I ever give in to the urge to talk like Mother, I told myself, I'll cut my tongue out.

And yet, if don Pepe was charmed by Mother's conversa-

tion, I had to admit that I was, too. Her voice, subtle and shimmering as silk, insinuated itself into the most secret folds of my being. Though I can't remember it exactly, I'm sure this was how Mother taught me to hate everything that wasn't clear and straightforward. Even without meaning to, Mother contributed to my education.

In one completely unnatural sense, I would forever be her only reason for living. Neither Father nor Antonio fit into her universe, but she felt that in our lack of love we could establish between the two of us the deepest bonds of hatred. She was aware that I was no longer a child, and therefore well able to follow her labyrinthine thinking. That mattered to her. At Father's request she had agreed to pay more attention to my education, but less with the idea of "preparing me for the world," as they say, than as a way of getting closer to me without having to create a normal mother-son relationship between us. In this context, don Pepe was the perfect incarnation of the physical cruelty she herself was incapable of. She loved to spy into the chasm separating me and my professor, watching the whirlwinds forming in its depths.

Mother was well aware of everything that happened between Antonio and me. She didn't give a damn about our sexual relations, but she couldn't stand the universe of love my brother sheltered me in. My insolent stare clearly told her that I didn't consider myself abandoned by God, that her loveless anathema hadn't put me out of

the running. I went on living whether she loved me or not. So she had chosen don Pepe as an extension of her avenging arm.

As proof, beyond the four hours of daily warfare, she never asked whether I was doing my homework, and when I ostentatiously set out my books in the garden to study, she would snap the curtains shut, the only precise gesture I ever saw her make. I would wander around the house, reciting my lessons aloud, and hear her door close at my approach.

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No doubt about it; senor the specialist was nothing to her but another punishment she was inflicting on me. No need to look for something that wasn't there.

In spite of his belief in spreading knowledge through terror, don Pepe actually turned out to be an excellent teacher. His presentations were accurate, and the conclusions he drew flowed as nimbly as running water. He managed to give life even to a subject as deadly as the official history of Spain. To read only the textbooks authorized by the government, you would think our country was Glory's original cradle, and the present regime its inevitable historical extension. The Spanish emerged as conquerors, symbolized by the undeniable impartiality of the sword and the cross, whereas the English, for example, were nothing but pirates. Queen Isabella the Catholic was as far from Queen Elizabeth of England as God was from the Devil, and just as fundamentally different.

With a gleam in his little eyes and an ironic smirk on his lips, don Pepe would proceed to tear those false and outdated concepts to bits for me, and by the end of the history lesson I was convinced that it made more sense to take the Devil's side. A matter of getting nearer to the truth. And since he brought up the country's current situation, "stagnant and still as a reedy lake," in connection with every subject, one could only conclude that freedom springs up where the Devil sets his hoof. Locked away as I was behind the walls of the house, I didn't know my country, but I already felt like

getting the hell out of it, to breathe the healthy air beyond our borders.

In those sublime moments when his explanations reached the height of rebellion, our teacher-pupil relations became almost cordial. He could feel it, and his voice became heavy with emotion, drained of any lyricism. All my senses quickened, and each of his statements made me grow by a cen-

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tury. But then he reverted to his role of absolute despot, felt the need to see what his sowing had produced in my poor soil, and started asking me questions. My pride being stronger than my vanity, I never answered him. I set my silence against his insistence, my ironic look against his palm- wood cane.

"If you fail your exam, I'll kill you!" don Pepe would shout.

Delighted, I realized that by being the despair of the specialist in lost causes, I had found the way to pay Mother back.

At times, Mother would appear in the parlor for a moment to find out how the work was going, surrounded by the cloud of smoke that lately followed her everywhere, a kind of plasma in which she became more and more vague. Her voice didn't show the slightest interest, and she took no pains to hide it. Quite the contrary: before getting an answer, she would add some remark about the weather (which she never saw), straighten the carnations Clara had clumsily arranged in their vase (Clara the Awkward), and her black dress, adorned with yellowish-white cuffs and collar, would once again disappear into the darkness of the hall, leaving the door ajar.

Senor the specialist, who stopped bothering to answer after a while, would kick the door shut. I suspected he would have preferred to put his foot to Mother's behind, but in spite of his "legendary" anticlericalism, he felt the same respect for his meal-ticket's posterior

as one would for the Eucharist. The storm would blow my way then, and the palm-wood cane would start making dangerous arabesques around my person. Eyeing him with mistrust, I wouldn't move a muscle. The ticking of my heart speeded up like a clock suddenly gone berserk, but I strained to keep my face from showing the fear that was twitching within me like a

fish out of water. Mastering it, I continued to hold my tongue. Strength of character is built in silence, I once read in one of Mother's books. Being able to put such an outlandish point of agreement into practice filled me with pride.

Don Pepe roared with anger:

"Fail your exam, and Fll flay you alive! You can be as tough as a lobster, I'll still tear your skin off!"

I could immediately see myself cracked open on a plate, but to read the feelings behind the angelic indifference on my blond child's face, senor my professor would have to have been as clever as I.

Without war, what would be the point of living?

That unanswerable axiom never fell from don Pepe's lips. Since he couldn't demonstrate its truth in the newfound peace that reached across the entire country like an epidemic, he worked relentlessly to prove it at my expense. In the setting of Mother's parlor—designed with only calm in mind—don Pepe's warlike tenacity was a constant contradiction to the voice on Father's radio talking about peace, a voice that didn't let up for an instant either.

Without knowing anything about my country's situation, I had the impression that those two presences in the house—don Pepe and the radio—were all I needed to get a pretty good idea of it. The house, which Mother had inherited, stood for Spain and the Spanish inheritance. It harbored every social class, every political persuasion,

and above all, silence: that huge, oppressive silence, growing in the darkness of a mushroom-bed, where the simplest word could endanger the tongue that spoke it, that guilty silence, that bird of ill omen whose shadow lengthened across the entire peninsula.

From time to time, when Mother dropped her banalities and don Pepe felt she was inclined to listen, he would talk

about the jails. Many of his friends had been locked up fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years ago, he said, when the ceaseless litany about peace and victory had begun. He got word from them somehow. It wasn't anything to laugh about.

"It's no joke, spending your whole life in jail just because you lost the war," he said, his voice shaking with waves of sadness. "It isn't fair. Losing your illusions isn't enough, apparently; you have to lose your life as well. They think it's the only way to cure you of the urge to ever try again. Do you know that there are children who have never seen their fathers? And those fathers aren't dead, they're locked up. For life. You and your children were lucky, senora. Your husband, too; he's at home."

Mother didn't answer, but looked at don Pepe with a kind of anguished smile. It was one of the few times I saw the shadow of an even remotely human emotion in her face.

(I learned only much later that Father's freedom had cost her a lot of money.)

"Money works wonders, senorito." (Clara's conclusion.)

When don Pepe and Mother reminisced about the war, I wouldn't have left the parlor for anything in the world. Though silenced into sleep, their memories came vividly back to life once given the chance. The war had been fought ten years before I was born, but it

gave birth both to the principles that shaped my life and upbringing, and to a large share of my memories.

Although none of all this concerned me directly, I still felt it would taint my life forever. A hereditary defect carried in the blood, a virus that lived on for want of antibiotics; the mushroom-bed, always.

To hear don Pepe's bitterness, you would think half of Spain was rotting in jail (these were real jails, scattered all over the the huge jail of silence that was the country itself), and the other half narcissistically admiring itself in the mir-

ror of victory, using the new peace to drive those who had been defeated further into darkness. Don Pepe had made an inventory of all the hymns, flags, Masses, glorious speeches, official inaugurations, and state visits, and he kept his bitter list up to date.

"All the people who insulted him, called him a dictator, now come to visit, and he doesn't bother taking so much as a step beyond our borders. Can you imagine a more complete triumph? He can rest easy. Never has mass murder produced sweeter or more abundant fruit. The moment you strangle a people's freedom, all the world's official powers become your friends and allies. We should all die of bitterness, senora; it's the only duty we haven't fulfilled. I'd like to see him running a cemetery. Maybe once we were dead, we'd be braver about rebelling." (He finished his glass of wine at a gulp.) "But while I get drunk, he must be laugh-

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Who was it they were talking about? I should have asked Clara or my brother, but felt I was better off not knowing. They were always

speaking of an old sore that never healed, and I had the feeling that by scratching at it with the nails of my curiosity, I would be in danger of getting an infection. Maybe a deadly one.

That day, Mother gave senor the specialist a look as deep as it was unexpected, and her eyes filled with tears. I thought I glimpsed a decayed image of Carlos mixed with Father's real one in that watery mirror, but it only lasted a second, and Mother dried her tears before they ran down her face. Amazing. Mother couldn't allow herself any weaknesses. Her life was one long death, so why cry?

Hoarding my new knowledge, I kept everything I learned to myself. To show that I wasn't missing a trick, I would recite my lessons and give my opinions only to the blackbird, perched impassively on a branch of the chestnut tree. And when I had finished my parroting, the blackbird would

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whistle with pleasure and bob his head approvingly. We were good pals, the blackbird and I.

At times, I had the urge to show off to Antonio, and would launch into a discussion of how Arab colonization had benefited us. My brother listened, open-mouthed and wide-eyed, feigned surprise on his face.

"Well, well, you're a fast learner."

"I don't have anything else to do," I would answer, carefully putting on my most defeated look.

"Soon you'll be able to teach me all sorts of things, you'll

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1 guess so.

"For sure.”

"Anyway, since don Pepe’s come, you haven’t taught me anything new.”

The surprise on his face became genuine. "What do you mean?”

"You’ve dropped me.”

Furious, he took me in his arms and threw me on the bed, trying with all his might to smother me.

"All right, all right!”

He loosened his grip. "Listen to me, wise guy. The whole world can rot in shit before I drop you. Understand?”

"Yes.”

His strong, fierce gentleness took over the whole bed, and me with it. My confidence came back, as well as the feeling of being at one with my brother again.

One evening, as I was getting out of the tub, Antonio spotted a bruise on my behind, and I saw him go pale.

"Where did that come from?”

"Oh, I don’t know. I must have hit the steps, sliding down the banister.”

He didn’t even hear me. "Who did that to you?”

He was so upset, I was sure he thought Mother had hit me, so I decided to tell him the truth:

"Don Pepe has a cane, you know, and since Pm pretty stubborn . . . that's something you know about, don't you . . . well, he ... he just hit a little too hard, that's all."

Antonio was almost white. I would never have thought that something so ordinary as my teacher's excess of temper could cause such a reaction.

"He dared, the bastard!"

"But it’s nothing serious, I tell you. It's really my fault."

He stared at my bruise without hearing me. His hand had been about to stroke my behind, but panic had stopped him at the last minute, and he wasn’t even able to brush my bruised flesh.

"Just what does he think this is, slavery? I'll show him!"

I felt I should minimize the whole thing, but was petrified by a hardness on his face I had never seen before. A dangerous light glinted in his eyes, and an animal's clenched teeth showed between his tight lips. The black-and-blue mark someone else's hand had put on my behind had enraged him—even though I didn't always emerge unscathed from our own wrestling matches.

A savage heat started burning in my flesh, and I suddenly felt proud of having caused the bruise, which had the magnificent power of showing me the strength of my brother's passion. My skin became translucent, the better to show Antonio my pre-adolescent frailty.

He couldn't take his eyes off my bruised flesh. "The bastard! The bastard!"

The tension that abruptly seized his body showed how much of a man he was. His muscles looked as if they were about to burst out of his skin. Though only seventeen, he was almost as big and strong as Father. I was small and frail, like Mother, and would lose myself in

the curve between his stomach and his thighs that welcomed me every night.

My brother was tense that night, his sleepless eyes two

dangerous holes in the darkness of the room. I snuggled against him, trying my most brazen tricks to excite him. But without insulting me with rejection, his penis remained soft. I put my lips on his with the daring of a thirsty little animal, but his tongue didn't react, and stayed as dry as a stone. Eyes locked on mine, he could only see the monstrous shape, multiplied a thousand times, of the tiny bluish bruise.

Finally, feeling a little let down, I put his arm around my neck and fell asleep, my blond curls tickling his chin as usual. I missed his smiles and his powerful hugs from our nightly ritual. And all the rest, of course.

No nightmares troubled my sleep that night. I slept on a pink cloud, more certain than ever that I was a permanent part of my brother's life.

When I woke up next morning, Antonio had the hollow look that comes from a night without sleep. He had deep circles under his eyes, and his teeth were clenched even more tightly than a few hours before. His hand, tense with worry, stuck like a bandage to the little bruise on my behind that had caused the whole drama.

Later that day, Antonio burst into the parlor before my class was over. He hadn't bothered to knock.

Don Pepe and I were deep in an analysis of the colonial wars. (Our wars, of course, in America. As usual, don Pepe had his own ideas on the subject.) Antonio's eye went to the palm-wood cane, and I realized something was about to happen.

Very deliberately, my brother locked the door and turned back to senor the specialist.

Don Pepe finally found his voice: “Do you want to talk to me, Antonio? Wouldn't it be better if we were alone?"

“Pm going to show you the thing I love more than anything in the world."

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(His voice suddenly sounded as if it had at least a hundred years of experience. A night without sleep really works on you.)

He looked at me and said, “Take your clothes off.”

I understood right away that this was no dormitory joke, but an order, and not to be argued with. I slowly obeyed, going from my silk shirt to my cotton underpants.

My brother went on, still pointing at me:

“Man’s body, if you’ve read the Gospel, is a temple. And that particular body, my brother’s body, is my temple. I’ve worshipped there since I was ten, if you know what I mean.”

Stark naked, I saw no point in acting modest. I was standing with my back to the light from the French doors, four and a half feet of appetizing slimness under the eyes of the two husky men opposite me. Despite our terribly secretive natures, a need to make spontaneous public confessions runs in the family. My brother was making his. My relaxed nakedness was my way of making mine.

“I won’t even let my parents raise a hand to him. Do you think I’m going to let you?”

“I am his teacher, not his . . .”

“ . . . brother,” finished Antonio, in a voice as sharp as a whip-crack. “I’m his brother. Me.”

They watched each other in silence. No need to explain further. My brother came over, turned me around, and showed him the bruise on my behind.

“You did that, and it’s a sacrilege. This is my answer . . .”

Antonio’s fist flew straight into my teacher’s face, which immediately started to spurt blood, and don Pepe fell to the ground. Lying there, he heard my brother’s last words:

“And if you ever try that again, I’ll kill you.”

It was really Antonio’s big scene on the field of honor. He must have thought it up last night, and refined it this morning at school. I loved the way he put it into practice. I will never forget those crazy words. Spoken by my brother, they

filled my heart with daring. And don Pepe certainly had no reason to doubt them. The power of my brother’s punch had surprised him as much as it had me.

"Let’s go upstairs.”

I didn’t bother getting dressed. Still naked, I went out into the hallway, where an audience awaited me: Clara, surprised to the ends of her cleaning-lady’s kerchief; Mother, holding cotton pads and a bottle of alcohol, as serene as a Red Cross nurse on a battlefield (this from a movie I saw a few years later) and Father, not daring to cross his study door, that boundary between his life and us. To his critical eye, he must have felt that, moustache and graying temples aside, his son Antonio was the spitting image of himself.

My brother spoke up: "I’ve always been the one to take care of him. Things aren’t about to change now.”

No doubt about it, we've always had a weakness for melodramatic scenes in our family; none of us ever passes one up. And my brother's age added a note of insolence.

Antonio said his next words to Mother: "The specialist in lost causes may need some patching up. I can see you're all ready."

Then I climbed the stairs, like a star in the spotlight. I wasn't about to pass up my chance to make an exit, either.

Behind me, I could feel the atmosphere crackling with electricity, but no spark had been struck. The conditions that would bring about the final cataclysm (if they ever did) weren't yet ripe.

Back in our room, I lay down on the bed, stretching like a cat for a few moments, arms and legs in the air. Antonio didn't waste any time. He gave me that special look he saves just for me, and this time, didn't bother closing the door behind him, as he always had before. Instead, he opened the window overlooking the garden and started to undress.

Looking at him that day, I suddenly realized my brother had painlessly gone through adolescence already and started

down the broad path of complete virility. His gaze never leaving me for a second, he took his pleasure—which was always mine—but without taking the final step. When I asked him why, he answered while nibbling on my nose:

"Don't worry, that'll come later. You're still too young. And I don't think I could control myself. I'm afraid for you."

"Do you do it with anyone else?"

"I'd cut it off before I ever did that."

"I'll be the one to cut it off, if I ever hear you did."

My brother started to chuckle. All need for silence had vanished. And then he went at it all over again, his laughter and panting mingling with mine.

It was three in the afternoon, and the sun from the great unconfined space of the garden flooded into our room. A hot sun that dried the sweat on our bodies. And my brother's sperm.

I am pretty sure all of the house’s inhabitants witnessed our exploits, at least with their ears. But no other presence came to slip between us. Only the fearless blackbird, perched on its favorite branch in the chestnut tree, even bothered to look.

"Now we can go back down to tea," my brother said an hour later, his too-blue eyes sparkling. "I'm sure the whole family will be there."

We had nothing but bathrobes on, deluxe presents from Mother. You have to take opportunities as they come.

CHAPTER

9

A S IT turned OUT, the whole family wasn't there when we took tea, contrary to Antonio's pre- Jl JL diction. In spite of all the commotion, Father felt he had to see the client he had been expecting that afternoon, as Mother put it. Their meeting must have been about something serious; it lasted over two hours.

Mother had arranged the parlor to make don Pepe as comfortable as possible. She gave him practically the whole sofa to stretch out on, and had drawn only the lace curtains, which made a filigree of the light from the garden. The depths of the room remained in shadow, the only setting in which Mother felt up to facing a gathering. The air reeked of alcohol and iodine.

On the sofa, the specialist in lost causes looked like a Goliath who had just barely survived his encounter with David. In fact, he was holding forth on that very subject when Antonio and I came into the parlor. Since my brother had referred to the Bible first, don Pepe picked up the thread right away, and was laboring to lead Mother down some obscure labyrinth or other. His point was to create a moral image, of course. The discussion was Byzantine—since in Mother's eyes my big strong brother could only pass for David within

a certain moral framework—but the two of them were completely in their element.

At the sight of us, don Pepe abruptly stopped his chatter. He wasn’t much to look at: a dirty tub of lard in shirtsleeves that had just been spilled onto the sofa. Mother had plastered a clumsy bandage across

his face, indiscriminately covering a bit of nose, lip, and ear, but since it was nearly tea-time she had carefully left his mouth free.

Antonio said hello as if he had just come home from school, and sat down without bothering to ask Mother’s permission. His attitude showed that he felt the house belonged to us; there was no need to stand on ceremony. As the head of the family, he merely asked, Ms tea ready, Mother?”

"Yes, darling,” Mother answered right away, without any scolding tone of surprise in her voice. "Aren’t you going to get dressed?”

Antonio: "It’s hot.” He walked over and opened the French doors, as he had just done with the window of our room. "It’s a beautiful day. Let’s let some air and light in here. We all need it.”

I thought I sensed a hidden meaning in the remark about the need for light and the beauty of the day, but nobody commented on it. Either I was too clever, or the others too dense.

The stench of alcohol and iodine wafting from don Pepe’s battered face vanished in a moment, giving way to the warm smell of jasmine from the garden.

Mother rang her silver bell, and Clara appeared like some absurd puppet, framed by the parlor door. She had probably been standing in the hallway, waiting to come in. (Character: maid-of-all-work. Our Clara.)

"Clara dear, bring the tea. Sliced country ham and tomato salad for the professor and my son. Hot chocolate and

cookies for the child; musn’t spoil his appetite. Tea with lemon for me/’

She spoke to don Pepe: 'Tm not feeling well. It must be the heat. When spring gets heavy, like today, it throws my metabolism off balance. The jumble of smells ... I never could stand it.” (A small sideways glance at my brother, who pretended not to hear.)

"Please don’t forget the wine,” my teacher managed to add before Clara disappeared. And to Mother: "Senora, the heart needs to be warmed a little more each day. At my age, that is.”

"And at mine!”

Mother drew a pack of cigarettes from her purse and offered one to Antonio. "No thanks,” he replied, "I have my own.” Without haste, like someone making a gesture so ordinary as to be second nature, he rummaged in his bathrobe pockets for his cigarettes and lighter. Before taking one himself, he gave Mother a light. Don Pepe’s eyes were straining to widen in surprise.

Everything happened so unexpectedly that Mother, with one of her charmingly vague gestures, offered me a cigarette as well. Despite the novelty of realizing that my brother was a veteran smoker, I kept my wits about me and shook my head. Our specialist’s eyes were already popping out of his head; if I had had the nerve to accept, I’m sure they would have rolled on the ground.

Casually smoking in front of Mother may have been my brother’s way of saying that he had decided to fight parental authority and the ludicrous world she had enclosed the two of us in. It was obvious that he would never again submit to her insane tyranny of silence. Ever since coming home unexpectedly an hour before, Antonio had been raising the ante of his rebellion. No more submission. He was spreading the freedom he had won in his relations with me to the

whole house, and—for all I knew—was already doing the same in the world outside. It occurred to me that he was sure to be the worst-behaved student at school, and the feeling I had of loving him even more deeply caught at my throat.

But there I cut my ruminations short. I didn't know the outside world yet, and it was none of my business. Even if life in a house is only a reflection of life outside, I didn't want to start worrying about it. Someday, of course, I would open our heavy wooden gate and pass into that other world I had already glimpsed, with its churches, flags, priests, and seedy people—or rather people who had gone to seed, like that visitor of Father's I had once let in. But I wanted to keep my mind unsullied, so as not to look at the world with a jaundiced eye.

Antonio's voice broke into my thoughts. "No, no, professor, don't bother putting your jacket on. It's hot. Make yourself at home."

I looked at don Pepe. With a none too cheerful smile, he hesitated and finally left his jacket on the corner of the sofa. "You're right, it is hot."

"The anarchy of our climate," put in Mother, "is something I have always hated." By which she meant that although it was only the end of January, heat and springtime were already in the air; the jasmine had suddenly started to bloom and was giving off its sweet smell.

"Looks like you're feeling better, aren't you? You're not bleeding as much."

"Yes, I do feel better. I have to say you have a fist like iron."

"I've done a bit of boxing, you know. I like the sport a lot. It relaxes me."

"You were relaxed, before, when you hit me?"

"Sure. I try to do everything I do calmly."

"His father was like that when he was young. Heredity

really is remarkable/' noted Mother, brightening the parlor with her smile.

"You mean he hit hard, too?" asked don Pepe bitterly.

"I mean he went straight for whatever he wanted, without any wasted motion. Only he changed with time."

Mother's voice was sounding a kind of warning, like a judgment without appeal. Aimed at my brother. Or maybe at both of us.

"Let's be fair. As far as your husband is concerned, time alone isn't to blame, but circumstances, too. As you well know, seriora, circumstances change men more than time."

"That won't happen to me, I'll tell you." My brother had spoken, and without arrogance, it seemed to me. (Though I've always been prejudiced where he is concerned, I have to admit.)

"You're too young to have an opinion about that," said our specialist, returning to the fray.

"That's where you're wrong, professor. I am young, but that's what lets me see you and my parents clearly. You've built us a lousy world, yet you cling to it. Being defeated by time and circumstances is no excuse. Look at my little brother. He's almost six years younger than me. You'll never give him a taste for freedom, and I want him to be free. That's the real reason I love him so much; because I want him free."

Gazing at her cigarette smoke, Mother asked, "And your deep love will give him that freedom?"

Glancing at her, Antonio said, "Yes."

Mother looked at me. "Are you sure of this?"

"Yes," repeated my brother.

"I didn't ask you," Mother cut in, her eyes still holding mine.

"Yes," I said, without looking down. "I'm sure of it." Silence fell.

From lack of practice, Mother and Antonio were smoking

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continuously, never taking their cigarettes from their lips. They gave off a kind of nervous excitement, like two young athletes warming up for a big event.

So despite the artificiality of the family tea, war had been declared. My rebellious brother could already foresee my future freedom; even if they dominated my surroundings and my person, silence and bitterness would no longer rule my inner world.

That afternoon, I felt my brother's voice had drowned out the voice on the radio. Never again would it insinuate itself into our consciousness as it had up to then.

In any conflict, there is always a precise moment when the enemy starts to lose. We may not always realize it, but that moment acts on us in a special way: it unbolts the gates of the mind and sends our thoughts whirling free. And from then on, slavery ceases to exist. Your gaze becomes critical, even if it is still lowered. It sees rights and obligations in a new light, and when it moves on, the corrosive film it leaves behind starts its own work of destruction. No more credibility. No more intimate consent. And only just enough obedience to keep nudging the system toward its final agony.

In that confused agony my own life, my free consciousness, would begin.

"Did you know that I start civil engineering school in October?"

The question was directed at don Pepe. Our specialist glanced up in surprise, and asked in turn, "Aren’t you too young for such advanced studies?"

"I have to hurry up. I want to finish school before Mother’s money runs out completely. It may as well do me some good."

Now it was Mother’s turn to look up in astonishment. Antonio’s words had hit home.

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“Darling, that money belongs to me, and what I do with it is my business. It doesn't concern anyone but me."

“You didn't earn that money, Mother, you inherited it. So it concerns all of us. In any case, all I want from it is my engineering degree."

“In what field?" That was don Pepe again. Clara was taking her time bringing in the tea, and he didn't want the situation to get out of hand. If a family quarrel broke out, tact would force him to excuse himself, and pass up the pleasures of his gut. He would have done anything to pour oil on the waters.

My brother grinned broadly. “In civil engineering, as I just said."

“Hard, very hard."

“I know, I've already seen the curriculum."

“Do you think it's a career with a future here?"

“Everything can have a future here . . . the day the situation changes from what it is now."

“Nothing is going to change," said don Pepe.

“Obviously. You won't be the ones to change anything. Neither side will. Neither the winners, who grabbed the country, nor the losers, who are paying the price. You all need each other to get by. What would you be without those butchers who keep you from acting alive? Nothing. Nothing at all. You're one of the losers now, one of the halves of the system. And, professor, the system needs you just as much as it needs the winners. But in all this, where are we supposed to fit in? We didn't take part in the grand confrontation. We

were born after the cataclysm happened. And we don't want to be the victims, either of one side's bitterness or the other's triumph."

“We expect you to have balls enough . . . forgive me, senora . . ."

(Completely disgusted, I remember thinking: “And long

live Spain'/' Why does any logical presentation of the facts always wind up with dirty words? Besides, I thought, it wasn't balls my brother lacked. I could even have guessed how much they weighed, and not been too far off.)

"... Not a nice word, maybe, but it fits," said don Pepe.

"Don't worry, my friend," said Mother, "I know what they are."

"... balls enough to flip the omelette over. Some of us hope for it, and some of us fear it, just as you said."

"It isn't a matter of flipping the omelette over anymore. We have to make a new one."

"What with?" Mother's voice betrayed a hint of interest.

"With new ingredients . . . We don't know what they are yet."

To Mother and don Pepe, Antonio's honesty came as a relief. They realized that nothing was going to happen anytime soon; they wouldn't have to change their habits overnight. I pitied them, so comfortably settled in their disgrace. My brother was right. Overthrowing elements like that was too good for them; annihilating them would be more to the point.

Without pity—and without malice, either—I imagined their final burial. No flowers, no wreaths. No farewells, no tears. And no joy, either. A burial borrowed from the humdrum of today, with no painful tomorrows. Period.

Having gotten over her interest, and maybe her fear as well, Mother asked, "Is it a well-paid career?"

"These days, you know . . . ," don Pepe began.

"It will just have to be."

Antonio had been looking Mother right in the eye. tie turned his gaze to our specialist. "Look at my little brother. He isn't wearing anything but a bathrobe, but it's silk; raw silk. It’s very expensive. It comes from England, and not directly, either, but by way of a shop in Madrid where they doubled the price. Isn’t that so, Mother? Even the cut of

that bathrobe cost money. It goes back to the time when Mother ordered her dressmaker to design a complete wardrobe for my brother, at every age. You see, Mother thought he was a monster: blind, maybe deformed, one of those freaks you show off here and there, like at the circus, but with class. And as a symbol, of course. If Im not mistaken—and I don’t think I am—it was to be Mother’s long, model pilgrimage, the direct consequence of the country’s debacle. Inspiring. Talked about. One of those miracles you always hope for, but which never happen. Your situation exactly. But it won’t happen to him!”

He looked directly at Mother again. “I’ll make money at my career if it kills me. If not here, then somewhere else. When your money runs out, I’ll take care of him. He won’t be your life’s achievement. You’ll never see him unhappy, because unhappiness will never touch him. I promise.”

His voice had softened, become almost tender, as when he talked to me. “You know, Mother, I don’t bear you any grudge, and I’m not doing this to spite you. But the two of you, you and Father, are a very important symbol for me. I don’t want my brother to be the victim of your failure, or Father’s failure either. And in any case, you and Father aren’t the ones I love. He is.”

“And yet, I love you.”

“I know.”

Silence settled on us again, and no one seemed in any hurry to break it. In all that had been said, there was certainly something worth thinking about; not new, necessarily, but finally spoken aloud. Too much love, like too much hate, doesn’t need many words: it has no subtlety.

In this calm, relaxed silence, which I was experiencing for the first time in my life—the silence that falls naturally when everything has been said—Clara came into the parlor pushing a little serving cart loaded with the tea things. There were thick slices of country ham, tomato salad with

garlic, crushed black olives marinated for a year in fennel- water, hearts of lettuce drenched in oil and vinegar, Mother’s porcelain tea service, my silver-and-ivory chocolate pot and china cup, the cut crystal glasses, our mono- grammed silverware, the sugar bowl, and the wine bottles, carefully wiped off by Clara the Clean. In Mother’s honor, a single yellow rose, a rose so delicate it might have been made by hand in a nunnery, stood drinking its cool water from an antique vase.

Mother gave everything a discreet glance—a habit she had never lost—and said, "Thank you, my dear. You can return to your duties. I will do the serving.”

Without a word, without a gesture, my Clara the Simple left the parlor. The silence, for me, turned heavy with sadness.

Mother served don Pepe first, and me last. Her hands, soft as yellow rabbits, abruptly lost their vagueness and became elegant and bold. (Boldly, they pulled the slippery silk of my bathrobe down over my thighs to my knees.)

"Even if we have to forgive you all your faults because you are under your brother’s total protection, manners are manners, young man. Don’t ever forget them.”

She said this slowly and with difficulty, as if mouthing a disagreeable quotation. I'm not sure I grasped all the implications of everything she said, but her purpose was unmistakable.

Quite openly, while pouring wine for don Pepe, my brother spread his legs apart, and for a split second showed us his penis, lovely as a cake baked by a spinster. Pretending to catch himself too late, Antonio pulled his bathrobe back across his knees with false clumsiness. With a smile that would have given a eunuch a hard-on, he said, "Excuse me," and then, "Some wine, Mother?"

Mother went pale, her eyes turning to fire for a moment, and I saw her chest fall under the physical weight of a dis-

tinct memory: Carlos. With Father, she must have lived all the things I was now living with my brother. Her hand faltered, wild with anxiety, not daring to go on moving over the serving cart. It fell awkwardly to her thigh, came undone like hot wax, etc., dripping sperm on the fine kid shoes in which Mother's feet hid their beauty.

From the moment he saw my brother's penis, as beautiful as the fairest fruit on the fairest tree in the fairest summer, our specialist stopped eating at his usual speed. The slabs of ham that had been disappearing into his mouth like scraps down a starving dog's gullet seemed to stick in his throat, tangled in a knot that don Pepe tried to loosen with great gulps of wine.

Quietly, I started to sip my chocolate, not wanting to let the smile that was tickling me all over reach my lips. It would have been rude, and besides—without quite knowing why—I didn't want to cause Mother further pain. But I couldn't help thinking that something in the room no longer rang true. Did it have to do with Antonio's penis? Why?

It was certainly something foreign to the house, like the voice that talked on Father's radio. In one way or another, don Pepe, Mother, and Antonio all belonged to that world of strange, unknown elements I called "the outside," and I sensed something in them I couldn't put my finger on. Their reactions and gestures amounted to a secret

language, a kind of ritual from which I was excluded. This was just an impression, of course, but it felt very physical, too. Uncovered on purpose or by accident, my brother's penis had produced a series of reactions that were just not an expected part of our family tea.

From my earliest days, I was used to thinking of my penis—and my brother's—as part of my everyday life, so don Pepe's and Mother's reactions, bared to my curiosity, baffled me. I understood that from then on I would have to

behave, never sharing with the others the free and easy ways I had with my brother. I took Antonio's words as a profession of faith, and promised myself I would save the temple of my body for his love's worship alone. I was sure there were unknown, esoteric rites in our private religion, and I wanted them performed immediately. But, despite my desire, I knew Antonio would reveal these secrets to me only when the time had come, and very gently, as he had up to now.

In short, the day I stepped into the outside world, I would have to watch myself, not make too much noise, circle around to catch the enemy unawares. Maybe don Pepe and Mother didn't act like other people, but to judge from their odd reactions, they shared with them some unspoken yet obvious fear. Here they were, eating, drinking, and making all the gestures of everyday life, yet their minds were elsewhere; something was bothering them.

And that something was none other than my brother's penis.

"Come September, I think this boy will be ready to start school."

Taken aback by my teacher's show of confidence in me, I felt he had spoken only to break up the wave of hostile silence that was beginning to engulf us, but Mother put all her charm into the little question-answer, "So soon?" She became as gracious as ever, as if being given the a chance to get the conversation going again made her as noisy as a eucalyptus branch shaking in the sea breeze.

Slices of ham, tomatoes, and bread once again started disappearing down don Pepe's gullet at their normal rate, and he tossed off countless glasses of wine at top speed. The vengeful thoughts that had briefly haunted Mother's mind vanished, driven away by the millstone grinding of our specialist's teeth. The problem could be set thusly: given a

human throat and two jaws working as fast as a timber wolf's, calculate the net weight of ham and bread, etc., and the possible dimensions of the stomach where they all get stuffed. The result: my teacher.

It was better this way, though. Its brightness restored, Mother's eye watched with approval as a not inconsiderable part of her fortune disappeared into that bottomless pit. With her love of cataclysms, was she thinking about the shit-hole where it would all wind up? I wouldn't have put it past her.

Gleefully, I searched her face, looking for the slightest hint of distress. But Mother's face was made of incorruptible matter, as perfect as marble. It showed no sign of erosion, and even the notion of decay was alien to it.

"Of course, he'll have to pick up some smattering of religion, and take his first communion. There's no way to take the entrance exam without all those papers."

"What papers?" asked Mother, as if she had just dropped in from another planet.

"The ones certifying his good standing in the Church."

The specialist in lost causes, suddenly turned professional terrorist, had thrown his bomb at last.

"He's baptized, at least, isn't he?"

"No."

"You don’t baptize a freak,” said my brother, his voice hard and tight. I felt he was about to demand all sorts of explanations, right away.

"Does this mean we will have to bring in a priest?”

"Yes, but if you don’t mind, please have him come when I’m not here. I’m too old for unpleasant encounters.”

Antonio: "As you know, priests are usually very busy in the morning, so we will certainly be having him over about now. I can see your daily tea going up in smoke, but it will do you good. You’ll lose weight, and you won’t have your

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heart attack until later. Besides, you'll be taking a load off Mother's mind. She isn’t used to going to her friends' funerals. After a while, it would just get on her nerves."

Mother's peal of laughter was as sudden as a summer shower. Then, with a note of gaiety in her voice, she said, "Don't worry; my confessor, don Gonzalo, will be delighted to be of service to me." Then more slowly, as if she were savoring a favorite dish: "He has been waiting to open the doors of heaven to me and my family for a long time now. If he hasn't yet taken this child in hand—or all of us, for that matter—it is because I firmly believe that the doors of heaven, and heaven itself, are closed to us forever."

"You're not wrong," my brother said approvingly.

"I know."

Silence. There was nothing left on the little serving cart. Slowly, I set my cup on it. "What does a priest look like?"

Three pairs of eyes stared at me.

"Can you believe it? A Spanish child who doesn't know what a priest looks like! Senora, you're a heroine. You have managed to save this

child from infection!"

"I know."

"A priest, my boy, looks like the worst of mankind's sins. Everything white in a human being turns black as coal in a priest."

"Put it more simply, my dear friend." Mother was having a wonderful time.

"A priest is an enemy of society disguised as a sheep."

Mother laughed.

"No, professor!" burst out Antonio. "Maybe they dressed up as sheep in your day. Now, they don't even bother anymore."

"You're right about that, young man. In my time, they were killers. Today, they can't kill anymore, so they terrorize people and inform on them instead. It comes to the same thing."

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Lice!

“Scum!”

Mother was laughing, and her laughter filled the parlor with a crystalline joy that spread to the four corners of the room, gently brushing the flowers, the paintings, the knick- knacks, and the curtains. Spilling out into the garden, it mingled with the blackbird’s chirping and the gurgle of the fountain.

Suddenly an ancient, primitive voice broke from its jail of silence in her throat and shouted: “Long live Spain!”

We were all speechless, thunderstruck. Nobody moved, nobody spoke.

“Which Spain?” my brother Antonio asked at last.

“The one that died,” said Mother, her brow curving across her face in an arc of distant clarity.

“Since this is the hour of truth—and I certainly won’t have this chance again in my life—I want to tell you that I loved your father deeply when he stood for everything that should not die; in other words, my opposite. But when all that died, and I was left, both dead and alive, in a world that had been made just for me, and which I rejected, my love died too. I’ll go even further, since I don’t think anything can shock you anymore: my whole life, I’ve had it up to here with 'proper’ things and 'proper’ ideas, and he wasn’t able to destroy everything, to give me a new world I would have wanted you to belong to.” She looked at my brother. “When I conceived you, I already knew that the world you would be born into was a grave, but my body was virgin, and I still had enough love left to take a chance, to hope for a miracle. But it didn’t happen.”

Then she looked at me, and I felt sure I was going to find out at last. “There was no love left for you, no hope. Not only was the world I was bringing you into a grave, but my body was, too—forever. This is why I wanted you to be a 'freak,’ as you say, or what I call a 'cataclysm.’ And now I

think I wasn’t wrong. You just might have that seed of anarchy I hoped to find in you. I can’t be sure, but I think you are going to destroy everything I hate: the order that devoured me. You aren’t my son, you’re myself. The love I have for you is awkward for both of us. But it is greater than any love known. Even if you can’t understand it.”

Just at that moment, Clara came into the parlor. She looked us all over, her narrowed eyes as sharp as needles, and set a basket of fruit on the little serving cart. Mother watched her, and I knew Clara’s merciless gaze pierced right through her. Clearing away the tea things, Clara’s hands were as calm as the waters of a lake. Driven by the same impulse as on the day of her confession in the hallway,

Mother reached out and touched them for the briefest of seconds—though whether it was a touch or a caress, I couldn't say. Clara went out right afterward, without trying to meet Mother's eye.

"She, too, loved Carlos. She, too, was disappointed. We have both lived the same death. Except that her husband fell in the war. She can keep a glorious memory of him . . . that is, if a common grave can yield one up. Mine—my husband or my memory of him, as you like—was broken by the war. I married him afterward, in peacetime, in defeat. I had a taste of sand in my mouth on my wedding night, and in spite of all the love and all the hope, I felt I wasn't being taken by a man, but raped by a corpse. It's a strange life, where we don't have time to love people before they die. . . ."

Don Pepe nodded. Already drunk, he no longer had the strength to speak. Sprawled across Mother's luxurious sofa like a deck of cards scattered after a game, his slovenly body looked like an ink-blot on a silver tray. Don Pepe illustrated Mother's story better than anyone. I was tempted to ask her if she, too, had had teachers like him, but something not quite in character kept me from spitting out that bit of nas-

tiness. Just the same—since I was still serving my apprenticeship—I learned a lesson from it: above all, I had to learn to reject. I didn't want to become fertile ground where others would sow their failures. Each to his own cross, as Clara the Unbeliever says. You can take your life, folks, and stick it you know where. I'm not responsible for it, and I'm not about to be its victim.

In a word, I was taking my brother's reaction, and making it my own.

CHAPTER

10

T hat day we all took tea together had been very revealing, and Antonio and I started to examine our situation in the family and in life that very evening. We didn't do it apart, which might have shown a distinct taste for anxiety, but together, in spirit and body. We were expected to behave in a way completely opposite from the way we did, but we reassured each other by words and gestures, and decided we should be better behaved and not be too wild in front of the others. We would keep the secret of our life within the locked, intimate circle of our room, and speak of it only between ourselves.

"So it's really for life?"

"Why ask me?"

"You're older than me. You should know."

"Yes, it's for life."

We were sitting opposite each other on the bed, without touching. Instinctively, our hands and eyes met.

"Only, I'm afraid for you."

That was a surprise. "Afraid for me?"

"Yes. You're too young, and besides, you're thoughtless. You don't have any sense of balance. It would be just like you to walk down the street naked, telling everybody what we do."

"I wasn’t the one who brought it up first. You told me to undress in front of the professor.”

"There! You didn’t make the slightest move to . . .”

"I thought that was what you wanted!”

"I did want it! But when I saw you naked in front of that big shit, I went crazy with rage.”

"So that’s why you hit him? I thought it was for love of me.” I pulled my hand back, and looked away.

"Are you jealous?”

"You’re the one who’s jealous. Me, I’m disappointed.”

Antonio fell on top of me like a boiling waterfall, drowning me with his strength and his bites. A few minutes later, all was well again.

At the end of the week, Clara came into our room, very upset. I had been struggling in vain with the mysteries of the rule of three. Why did there always have to be an x in life? It wasn’t any fun at all. Here we’d split the atom—and proved that it worked at Hiroshima—and this poor x was still driving me crazy. It had probably made my grandfather’s life miserable too, when he was a kid. Why didn’t they just figure the damned thing out once and for all, and go on to something else?

"Senorito, your mother would like you to come to the parlor.”

How polite she was being, Clara the Silly.

"What does she want? Doesn’t she realize I’m working?”

Clara reddened. "Enough of your nonsense, hear? There’s a priest downstairs!”

"A priest? Where?”

"In the parlor, with your mother.”

"Shit!”

"This takes the cake. It isn’t All Saints’ or Easter. Is your mother changing her stripes now?”

"Don’t worry. He’s here for me.”

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"For you? What’s the matter, honey? Are you having bad dreams?”

"I’m going to take my first communion.”

"Good God Almighty! Doesn’t anyone get out of it?”

I went out the door, leaving her sitting dumbfounded on the big fancy chest. But before I got to the top of the stairs, she called to me in a low voice. I waited for her to catch up.

"Tell me, honey, you know God doesn’t exist, don’t you?”

"Yes, I know.”

The sunshine of her smile lit up her whole face. "Then go ahead. Now I can rest easy.” (Clara the Saint.)

In the hall, I could sense something new in the mood of the house. Was it an unknown smell, or bad vibrations? Hard to tell. I went into the parlor, and found Mother and the priest sitting opposite each other.

They looked at me without moving. I went and stood with the light at my back, even though the darkness Mother usually moldered in was so thick that you couldn’t make out people’s faces. The priest had sharp eyes, I noticed, and I didn’t want to take too many chances on this first day of holv war.

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"Darling, I've taken advantage of an unexpected visit by my confessor to introduce you," Mother said. "He knows that your illness has kept you from getting a proper religious education. But now that your health doesn't worry me anymore, and since you have to take the high school entrance examination in September, I thought it was time to take matters in hand. This is don Gonzalo."

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, my son."

"From now on, you must call him 'father.' I'm sorry I haven't brought you up better. I apologize for my son's behavior just then, father. He is still a child where anything outside the house is concerned. As I have already told you in

all my confessions, his illness has caused this delay, which I couldn't justify in any other way. As you well know, father, not even grass grows properly when the soil is sick."

Well, this was news! To hear Mother, who was using language that must have come straight from her black prayer book, I was a chronic invalid in the eyes of the Church. I was so surprised that I must even have rolled my eyes, which surely helped the little play Mother had staged. I've rarely in my life even come close to admiring her, but Mother almost became my heroine that day. What nerve! The representative of a social class more powerful than power itself, not a shadow clouded her calm, respectful face as the humble authority in her voice made the services she expected from the Church perfectly clear. Everything was implied.

Don Gonzalo nodded, and felt impelled to say, "It is never too late to bring back the lost sheep."

"My son is not a lost sheep," Mother corrected him dryly. "He was simply born outside the fold."

"I understand perfectly, my daughter."

"I hope so, father. My son must now enter the world. I am only doing what I feel is my duty as a mother. I am putting him in your hands, and I am sure I am making no mistake. Through you, father, he will get the image of our holy mother Church that suits him best."

The words weren't meant for "my father," but for me. She was looking at me intently, as if trying to transmit their real meaning.

"Perhaps you would like to ask him a few questions."

A veteran hunter, don Gonzalo seized the opportunity on the wing. "My son, though you have grown up outside the bosom of our mother Church, you believe in God, don't you?"

My answer was all ready: "Blindly, father."

I glanced at Mother. A smile like dancing water was spreading within her, but her calm face remained unruffled.

I thought I glimpsed what she had called, a few days earlier, her "deep" and "awkward" love for me. Now we were even. Neither of us would carry the weight of the debt on our consciences anymore.

"Starting tomorrow, don Gonzalo will call on us three times a week, from nine to ten in the morning. You can leave us now; you must have homework to do."

Everything was so formal, I couldn't help bowing slightly as I got up and headed for the door.

"just a minute."

I executed an about-face that I felt lacked only a military band to back it up.

"You always kiss a priest's hand, my son. It's a kind of homage, a symbol of the respect we all owe to the representatives of the church."

I went over to don Gonzalo and kissed his hand. An unpleasant taste of wax stuck to my lips, and the man's smell almost made me throw up. Once out in the hallway, I spat out my disgust on the little carnivorous lambskin, Mother's whim.

Clara was waiting for me. Grabbing my hand, she dragged me into the kitchen.

“They always make people kiss their hands, the bastards.”

With a rag dipped in vinegar, she rubbed my lips so hard I thought the skin was coming off.

“There! Now you know what to do. With vinegar, there's never any infection. Feeling better?”

“Yes.”

“But what the Devil is your mother up to?”

“I have to start school in September.”

“Oh, shit!” And then, “It'll be hard, you know.”

“Sure will.”

“When does he start?”

“Tomorrow at nine.”

“I'll get my orders tonight, for sure. But don’t worry,

sweetheart. You know, under the Republic, we almost got rid of all those damned priests. Unfortunately, we didn’t have enough time.”

“Don’t feel bad. It could happen again. And who knows, maybe this time we’ll be able to finish the job ...”

Clara was lost in thought.

“He asked me if I believed in God.”

Clara looked at me in a panic. “What did you answer?”

“ 'Blindly, father.’ ”

Clara’s laughter filled the kitchen for a good long time, and the blackbird quickly chimed in from the garden. A minute of celebration.

“How smart you are, honey! How smart you are!” Clara couldn’t stop repeating, tears of joy brimming in her eyes.

Trailing a cloud of vinegar, I left the kitchen for my room, where Pythagoras was waiting. I closed the window so as not to hear my pal the blackbird calling, now that he had finally awakened from his morning nap. Solitude is the order of the day when you’re with Pythagoras, especially if you don’t feel any great love for him.

Very early the next morning, before breakfast, Clara appeared in our room wearing her most solemn expression. She looked as if there had been a sudden death in the family and she was the one who had to give us the news. She pulled open the curtains, and ordered us to get up.

Antonio looked at his watch, and asked, “What the hell is this? It’s only five A.M.”

“That’s right. Senora your mother is already dressed and waiting for you downstairs, with company

“Will you please tell me what the hell is going on?” repeated my brother, who tended to be a bit slow first thing in the morning.

“What do I know?” said Clara. “Nobody tells me anything in this crazy house.” And to me, “Your bath is ready. I’ll give it to you.”

"What is this nonsense?” said my brother with irritation. "We took a bath last night, as usual. Who do you think we are?”

"Why, monsignor the town’s bishop and his deacon, who else? Mister high and mighty!”

"Listen, Clara. I don’t want to get mad at you, but. . .”

"Will you please get off my back? I said get up, so get

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up!

"You’re not about to drag me out of bed.”

"Try to stay in it, and you’ll see!”

We could have gone round and round this way, so I asked, "What’s this early morning bath for, anyway?”

"Last night your mother told me, 'Wake them at five, my dear. Give him a bath, and bring him to me as pure as an angel. Everything has to be finished by the dawn Mass.’ ”

My brother finally caught on, and started to laugh. "It’s church stuff, kid.” Watching Clara wash me in the tub, his eyes full of malice, Antonio asked, "Do you know what all this 'pure’ business is about?”

"Pure as an angel,” Clara shot back, losing neither her patience nor her rhythm, "means without sin, according to senora your mother’s meditation book.”

When Clara talked like that, we both knew she wasn’t at all pleased. But my brother wasn’t about to let her off the hook.

"You don’t seem all that happy.”

"No, I don’t,” she said, soaping me a little harder.

"And which of my brother’s sins need to be washed away, do you suppose?”

Clara stopped her work. "Listen, sweetheart, don’t say 'my brother’ as if he were your private property.” She started up again, wielding soap and sponge with renewed energy. "Besides, if you don’t know what sins senora your mother is talking about, you can just keep quiet and wash up. If you’re looking for trouble, I’ll be there.”

"All right, all right.”

My brother left the bathroom, then came back carrying all his clothes. He took off his bathrobe, and, stark naked, started brushing his curly black hair. Clara looked him over openly, from head to foot.

"Do you mind if I get dressed here?”

Clara didn't answer. Then she said, "You remind me of somebody.”

"Who?”

"Carlos.” She sighed.

I pricked up my ears.

"When he and my husband were boys, I used to hide in the bushes and watch them swimming in the river, naked as jaybirds. When I die, I'd like that to be the last image I take with me.”

"If that's what you really want, it will be . . .”

I threw my brother a pained look, to warn him. Sometimes he didn't have any tact at all, the brute. I didn’t think poor heartsick Clara's feelings were to be taken lightly. Her life, deep and silent as a well, would sometimes light up with these tiny events from the past. Clara would mention them only very briefly, but enough to let you feel her pain. I loved her for that, Clara the Nobody.

Bathed and smelling like sweet basil on a summer night, I put on Mother's latest outfit for me with Clara's help: pale blue shantung suit, white shirt, socks and shoes. In the mirror, I saw my brother staring at me, greedy as a fat boy in front of a pastry-shop window. He was already getting a hard-on, and had to put on his underwear and pants right away. He blushed and winked at me in the mirror. My mouth went wet, and I found myself hoping the day would be a short one. At the same time, I noted this new voyeur side of Antonio.

We all went downstairs to the hall. "Go on in," said Clara, "they're waiting for you."

"Aren't you coming?"

"I won't have anything to do with this circus/' she snapped, and retreated to her kitchen in a fury.

In the hallway, my brother took me in his arms. His mouth against my ear, he whispered, "Promise you won't take what's going to happen in there too seriously?"

Before I could answer with a convincing yes, my lips were already opening to his, and his tongue was touching mine. We stayed like that for a few seconds, and I could feel our bodies struggling against our clothes. Aware of the risk—any of three doors could open to surprise us—we savored the moment with a new frenzy. I was trembling, and my brother hugged me against him harder. He finally let me go, and said, "You and I are all that's real. The rest is just a joke. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Let's go. I want to find out what's up."

"I'm afraid."

"Why? I'm with you."

“I don’t want him to touch me.”

“Don’t worry. I’m in great shape, this morning.”

Antonio put his large, strong hand on the back of my neck. Our faces composed, we went into the parlor.

I had the feeling that I had suddenly jumped an unexpected void and landed in a chapel. The drawn curtains were so thick, you would never have guessed there was a garden out there, or a street, for that matter, since the windows facing it were permanently covered by an enormous medieval tapestry. New candles had been stuck in the silver candelabras, and their light bathed the parlor’s air, furniture, and knick-knacks in a cloud of glowing dust. Mother was playing one of her old Chopin numbers on the record player, very softly. More than anything, she used to say, it gave the soul back the lost tranquility it needed. “A young girl, my dear . .

She was standing stiffly next to her piano, wearing a black dress with white polka dots and pearl earrings, necklace, and bracelet. A white lace mantilla proudly crowned her head. Her face was set in the ecstatic expression of a marble tombstone angel, and she looked as beautiful as she did ridiculous. For a second, I almost loved her. Looking at my brother, I read a mixture of admiration and surprise in his eyes, and felt deeply jealous. To stand it without walking out then and there, I told myself that that was probably how she had expected to go to Lourdes, with me as the freak. Mother might not have brought about a miracle, I thought to myself, but she certainly wouldn't have gone unnoticed.

Mother turned her transfigured gaze on me, piercing the cold veil of my eyes to read my thoughts. She gave me one of those smiles that never touched her lips, but that lit up her face as if a flaming torch had suddenly flared inside her head, a fantastic Halloween jack-o-lantern. I had the feeling she was taking a malicious pleasure in showing me what I had missed by opening my eyes sixteen days after I was born.

A little beyond, don Gonzalo was standing just as stiffly, a white alb over his black cassock, a prayer book in his left hand, the salt and holy oils on a little stand within reach of his right. The carefully folded white stole of happy occasions lay there as well, its gold-embroidered edges and cross gleaming in the candlelight.

Dressed that way, he looked even taller and thinner. His vulture's head poked out of narrow shoulders, with an Adam’s apple that protruded beyond his receding chin, thin lips, sunken cheeks blue with whiskers, burning eyes, and eyebrows thinning toward his temples. He looked like a devil in disguise.

"Come closer, my son.”

His voice had the reassuring tone of a second-rate actor about to start his big monologue. I assumed he meant me,

and walked toward him without looking at anyone. I carefully kept some distance between us just the same, and wound up in the exact center of a bizarre triangle made up of Mother, my brother, and the priest. If I had exploded, the whole bunch would have been blown away with me. Nice symbol; worth studying.

Without clearing his throat, a feat that deeply shocked me, the priest started his speech.

"My son, you have been separated from our mother Church for a very long time. Too long, I would say. But the fault has already been confessed, the sinner has repented, the sin is forgiven. All we need do today is bring the lost sheep back into the fold.”

"What the good father means is that we are going to celebrate your baptism,” Mother explained shortly, discomfited at being referred to with the highly inappropriate epithet of "repented sinner.”

Her solidly middle-class tone of authority must have been written into her genes for centuries, from the time when her family ruled over the Church. Her voice had the confidence that goes with a geneological

tree loaded down with bishops, Dominican fathers, and mothers superior. If Mother were pressed, she could pull a sainted poetess from her wealth of memories like a rabbit from a hat, a somewhat disturbed woman who enjoyed sticking banderillas into the good Lord's back like a matador.

Forced to choke back his venom, don Gonzalo continued his speech in a more measured tone, his teeth still clenched.

"Because of your lack of knowledge, my son, you are no doubt unable to understand what baptism represents. It is not a commonplace act, the first of a series of mere rites, but the opening of a door, the only door through which one can enter the very heart of the Church. As long as that door is closed, even if you are sure you are a son of God, you don't belong to His family. You risk living forever in the vague

area of His indifference, if not of His enmity. That is why you must make your peace with Him. All your life, some people will tell you that God is love, that you don't need to make your peace with Him to be forgiven. But He is hate as well. Otherwise, He wouldn't be perfect, and imperfection is not part of His nature.

"That is why, as of today, I feel I must give you this practical advice: if you someday find yourself hesitating between seeking His love or avoiding His hate, avoid His hate. And the only effective way to do that is to stay in the bosom of the Church. On that score, I might add that God's love is free, but His hate costs dear."

Though the picture of God don Gonzalo was painting for me could have been just about anybody (no need for this rig- amarole to introduce me to such a complete nonentity), I filled the parlor with my enthusiastic clapping. Three pairs of eyes swiveled to me. Antonio was so surprised that his mouth fell open, midway between catching flies and bursting out laughing.

Mother stayed serene, but it must have cost her a great effort; suppressed laughter showed in her half-closed eyes.

Don Gonzalo didn’t even bother looking shocked; his anger was stronger than his manners.

"Forgive me, father. Your words touched me so deeply that instead of listening humbly, as I had wanted to, I let my enthusiasm get the better of me.”

(There, I think I was laying the hypocrisy on a bit thick.)

The minister’s face immediately changed. Unable to soften the roughness of his features, he at least smiled. "I understand, my son. You are hungry for the Holy Word.”

His reproachful look went to Mother, who was impatiently tapping her foot on the carpet.

"Let’s get on with it, father. I’m afraid you won’t finish in time to celebrate the dawn Mass.”

"I have all the time in the world, daughter.”

“I wouldn’t have our needs impinging on your duties. Some things are still sacred to me, father.”

“To me, too, daughter. When God’s presence is needed more outside the Church than within, his ministers can’t hesitate. It isn’t neglect, but preaching the Gospel.”

“The Gospel is preached to savages, not to my son. I am in the Church. What my son needs is to be baptized.”

“You are right, my daughter. Let us be humble, and do our duty.”

“My oldest son is more than willing to be the child’s godfather. In fact, I would say he would be delighted to. He has often expressed the wish to protect this child when he enters the world. I want to make that his solemn obligation, a duty that arises from the social contract, which is more powerful than family love.”

She said these last words with the hiss of a snake. I thought I detected a veiled allusion to an expression she hadn't used in a very long time, "smelling sulfur."

"Should I pick him up?" asked my brother in all seriousness.

"He's too heavy," answered Mother, as serious as he.

"But I'm in great shape. I didn't spend myself this morning."

Mother and the priest shot him a hard look. Don Gon- zalo started to say, "My son, this is hardly the time . . ."

"I mean I didn't do my calisthenics, father."

(I suspected that Mother must have dropped a few hints about our relationship in her confessions.)

"You can pick him up if you like," said Mother. "Let's do things properly."

From his burning eyes, you could tell the priest wanted to flail about with his crucifix and exorcise us all.

My brother took me in his arms, and held me out to the priest like an infant. Spreading his legs to take my weight, he held my back up with his left arm, and skillfully slipped his

right under my thighs, so his open palm was glued to my behind.

Through clenched teeth, don Gonzalo started rattling off the holy words with bad grace. He consecrated me a son of God, named me for my saint's day, and after Mother whispered him my name, added it mechanically, consecrating me her son as well. He instructed my brother in his duty as a good Christian and godfather, said a few loaded words to Mother about how important it was for proper Catholic parents not keep their offspring from the bosom of our holy mother Church, then solemnly administered the salt and holy oils (I

was being baptized and confirmed at the same time), and made the sign of the cross on my forehead with his hot thumb.

While ail these rites were being performed, Antonio was gently stroking my behind, one of his fingers carefully probing my asshole. I was burning with pleasure, and a kind of ecstasy must have shone from my face, because the priest said, “My son, I can see you are beginning to believe in God. You are becoming His creature.”

My brother pressed harder with his finger. On the point of fainting, I murmured, “Yes,” which made everybody happy, each in his own way. Then Antonio set me down. Completely drained, I leaned weakly against him for a few seconds, feeling his body throbbing all over.

I felt we had just carried out a heroic action, one of our very first steps in subversion, and no one could point a finger at us. It was braver and sweeter than when we embraced alone in our room, and though the cold sweat on my forehead could have meant any number of things, only my brother and I really knew why it was there.

“You are now a Christian, my son. As of tomorrow, we will start making a good Catholic of you, the only road to salvation in this world here below.”

A somewhat menacing tone had crept into don Gonzalo’s

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voice. You could take it or leave it. Or rather, take it or else.

Mother must have been tired of the ceremony already. As she took off the fantastic lacy white flower-garden of her mantilla, her voice suddenly vague, like hot wax, etc., she said:

"Let’s leave the rest for tomorrow. This boy needs his breakfast. His forehead is covered with sweat. He hasn’t slept well, and he hasn’t

eaten. Are you sure you didn’t make him swallow too much salt, father?”

Before the priest could answer, her hand—a dove whose panicky flight could have taken it anywhere—lit on her little silver bell. Its unexpected tinkle caused one of those cataclysms in the parlor she was so fond of: all at once, the candle flames lost their hypnotic stillness, and a nearly imperceptible wave of shadows swept across the room.

This time Clara took forever to appear. When she finally came into the parlor, she looked only at Mother, her eyes hard and precise.

"Did you ring for me, senora?”

"Yes, my dear. Please serve breakfast.”

And to the priest:

"We have hot chocolate and cold milk. And cakes, of course. Clara is a wonder, even if she isn’t religious. Will you join us?”

"I have to take communion while celebrating Mass, daughter!”

"Forgive me, my dear. I had forgotten the custom. It’s been so many years since I’ve gone out in society!”

She kissed his hand, we did the same, and don Gonzalo understood that he was being dismissed. He went out first, followed by Clara’s steely gaze. He didn’t dare extend his hand to receive her homage.

Once don Gonzalo was gone, Mother blew out all the

candles and opened the French doors to the garden to let the heavy smell of burnt wick escape. Reality settled in to keep us company.

Mother took off her jewelry absent-mindedly, folded her mantilla with care, and spoke. "Please excuse me for not joining you in this very

special breakfast, but Pm a little tired. I think I am going to rest for a while/’

Before going out, she added, with a kind of doubt highlighting her imprecise movements, "I am delighted with your behavior. You are starting to make my life a completely unexpected adventure. Thank you.”

After she left, Antonio and I looked at each other in astonishment.

"She’s as clever as you are,” said my brother.

"She’s nasty. I don’t want her to agree with the way we live. She doesn’t have the right.”

"Don’t worry, she doesn’t agree. I think she’s pretending.”

"What about him? Will I have to kiss his hand every day?”

"If you don’t want to, just don’t. That’s all there is to it. Just tell him you’re allergic.”

"What does that guy have to do with God?”

"Nobody has anything to do with God. Not even me. Not even you. Not even God Himself. Say, do you want to go upstairs to our room, and I’ll explain all this? I won’t be able to pay attention to my classes if you let me leave like this.”

Bur I had other things on my mind just then, concerning this new stage in my life, my status as a Christian. In any case, Clara brought breakfast just as I was about to give in to temptation.

Only this time she didn’t leave right away, as she usually did. She poured three cups of cocoa and three glasses of

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milk, settled herself comfortably on the sofa, and faced my brother, who was looking annoyed.

"Ibs a good thing you can't see the face you're pulling, big boy."

Things were off to a bad start; Clara was on the warpath. I broke in:

"Did you know I just got baptized? That's what the mystery was all about."

"Of course, sweetheart. That's why I said to myself, d can't let the kids celebrate this all by themselves.' So here I am. Is it sweet enough?"

My brother didn't see any point in answering.

"It's very good," I said.

"I got up at four to make it. I thought I ought to treat you to some nice hot chocolate to help you get over the taste of the salt."

There she burst into ringing laughter.

Antonio: "I don't see what's cracking you up like that."

"It's my turn. This morning, you were the one who was cracking up."

"All right. It's getting late. I have to get going," he said, looking at me with pleading eyes.

"Not so fast!" (Clara's voice had a tone of authority I had never heard before.) "Do you know what I was thinking, in the kitchen?"

My brother was on his guard. He didn't look as brave as usual. You didn’t want to get on Clara's bad side. "I thought you and I ought to give the boy a present. And that's what I decided."

My ears pricked up.

"A present?" asked my brother suspiciously.

"A visit to town. We're going to walk you to school."

My brother's face suddenly lit up. He rushed over to Clara and kissed her.

THE CARNIVOROUS LAMB

"You're a genius!"

"But what will Mother say?" I asked weakly.

"She's asleep/' said Clara. "In two hours, she'll wake up, get on the phone, and everybody will learn that her little boy has gotten over his long illness and been baptized. Don't you want to end that nonsense once and for all?"

That was easy for her to say. Unconvinced, I answered, "Well, if that's what you want . . ."

Antonio spoke up energetically:

"Oh God, don't say another word." (Here he was, blaspheming on the day of my baptism.) "I've decided that you're going out this morning, and that's that. If she doesn't like it, too bad for her. Do you realize you're almost thirteen years old?"

Thirteen years. The words rang in the parlor like thunderclaps. Thirteen years spent locked up in a closed world. It should have been awful, but for me it wasn't; this was a world I knew. It had Mother's fascinating universe, my brother's arms, Father's absence, and Clara's company. There was the garden and the blackbird, the old chestnut tree, don Pepe. And this new adventure that was starting with don Gonzalo.

But who knew about the other world, outside? What would I find in it?

Clara and my brother finished their breakfast in a very good mood, choosing which way to go. As for me, the cocoa was weighing on my stomach like a brick.

We all got up. Anxiously, I looked at the parlor. This was the last time I would see it with my usual look, I said to myself. And with a desperate hunger, I tried to fill my eyes with that hated and beloved image, the only one I knew, the only one that appeared precise in my dreams.

In no great hurry, I walked out of the parlor with Antonio’s right arm tightly around my shoulders. We crossed the

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hall and went to the main gate, which Clara pushed open onto the street, looking at me with her eyes full of courage and with the deference due a prince. Or a corpse. She might as well have announced loudly, "Lazarus is leaving the realm of darkness at last/’

CHAPTER

11

T he town, at seven in the morning.

The bells of all the churches were impatiently calling the faithful, and people hurried here and there, somber black silhouettes that appeared from all over. Old women, young girls with heads bowed as if afraid of being recognized or called to, or just pausing on their way, and proud young men, neatly shaved and dressed, prayer books in hand.

None of them looked as if they were going to a party, though. It didn't take me long to realize that in my town you went to church in silence, and alone.

"Where are they going?"

"To Mass, before going to school or to work."

"Do the old women have to go to work, too?"

"No. They stay in church until noon."

"Do they have more prayers to say?"

"Must be."

Clara never liked to dwell on anything having to do with religion. But she was watching me out of the corner of her eye, and her look followed mine.

The town was full of dogs, all tracking some completely invisible prey along the ground. With manifest civic pride, they all pissed on the same tree-trunk. And not a master in

sight. They were friendly enough, sometimes coming over to sniff at your shoes or hands, wagging their tails furiously for a few seconds if you tried to pet them, so you wouldn't think they were ungrateful. Then they would immediately take off, trotting sideways as if they didn't know what a straight line was. This early, they didn't bother barking.

"Maybe we could bring one home with us, if it doesn't belong to anyone."

"Think of your Mother's reaction, and ask again."

On Clara's advice, I thought about it, and didn't ask the question again. Mother was as vague and imprecise as you pleased, but sharp as a well-honed knife on the subject of domestic animals. Clara knew what she was talking about. For the twenty years she had been with Mother night and day, she had been asking for a pet canary to liven up her kitchen, and for twenty years Mother had adamantly refused.

"If you want a dog, I'll buy you one," Antonio suddenly decided.

"And just who do you think you are?"

Clara's tone didn't leave any room for doubt. I wouldn't be getting a dog.

There were also a few cats in town, but they were like flashes of white, black, gray, or yellow that vanished quick as a wink into garden gates or open windows. The dogs didn't even have time to set off after them. Now you saw them, now you didn't. Only the sparrows took notice, as they hopped about on street corners with their bellies grazing the sidewalk, a habit they seemed to love. The cats knew their ways, and would crouch motionless there, waiting to pounce on the birds in a blur of speed. Quite a few went down the hatch. A fine breakfast on an empty stomach, I suppose.

Lots of squares. Small and large. And all of them covered with acacia trees and big beds of scarlet geraniums, a couple of brown-painted benches, and a fountain with a man who

looked like my grandfather (like his portrait that hung in the hallway, I mean) standing (or seated) on top.

But nobody sitting or strolling, just a few gardeners sprinkling the flower-beds, the trees, the benches, the stone gentleman with the big moustache, the sidewalk, the cats, the sparrows, the street, the dogs, and the passersby, including us. Cigarettes dangling, they seemed to be humming something under their breath, or maybe talking to themselves. Clara chuckled to see her sandals and stockings soaked.

The sun was already shining on the house terraces and the treetops, and it looked as if the day was going to be hot, but the town's morning sprinkling gave off a pleasant cool feeling. At this hour even the flies were still, but maybe there weren't any in town. Maybe they were all locked away in our garden.

I assumed we were on the way to the high school, following narrow, unexpected streets that ran in every direction. My brother seemed to be in a hurry, but didn’t fail to point out places he thought might interest me.

“That's where I bought my slide rule." Or, “That's where Mother ordered your history books and your notepads."

Clara: “And her prayer book in this store here, when it was fashionable." You could still make out the words “Religious Bookstore" above the metal shutters.

My universe was clearly too limited. The town's history didn't concern me. I had been living like a chick in an egg that for some reason had never been hatched. So there they were, my egg and the town, two elements living side by side, but completely alien to each other.

I didn't try to figure it out. At any rate, nobody was staring at me as if I had just dropped in from another planet. I could live and die at home, bathe and eat with my brother, take classes with my teacher, get up and go to bed like everyone else, and dress in the latest fashion thanks to Mother's catalogues, all without having anything to do with the peo-

pie outside, even visually, and no one would give it a thought. I could see that my reputation as a "'freak" or a "hopeless invalid" was just a trick of the telephone. Mother and her friends knew the whole story, but nobody else. Not the town.

And then, the red-yellow-red flags.

They were everywhere. On the roofs of public buildings, atop tall flagpoles at street corners, and—what was more surprising—on the balconies of private homes, sometimes hiding handsome grillwork or flowerpots, and also high up on church steeples, tangled with the crosses, or draped from round convent windows like rugs hung out in the sun.

Stunned, I gaped at this unexpected flowering of red- yellow-red. It made the town look medieval, suggesting a nomad's camp that would be struck the next morning and moved elsewhere (I saw this in a book). I just couldn't believe that the ridiculous disguise garbing the town and shaming its bricks and mortar was there for good. If I were a bird, I would have long since flown away in search of a natural landscape. But no, the birds were there, shitting on the flagpoles (a symbol).

We came out on a handsome square with arcades, where the town hall was located. It was like suddenly stepping into a cloister. Tall palm trees rose above the red-tiled roofs and the iron arrows and roosters on top of the towers, as if they were looking for an unsullied sky to fly away into; some pure sky, a mirror of the sea, where no one had yet hung a red- yellow-red flag. The palm trees were so delicately green, and the air they breathed so clear, that the rust of their trunks looked artificial, like some plastic sheathing put on to

tame roots that were too much in love with the blue sky. Birds played at showing the trees the way to freedom, as thoughtless and malicious as those healthy people who visit terminally ill patients in the hospital.

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The arcades were arrayed around us in lines as straight as a victory day parade (probably only a coincidence). Each one bore its own symbols and coats of arms, but all were framed by the same aristocratic-looking shield. The light under the arches, already softened by the almost complete absence of sun on the square, faded into shadow. I could hardly make out Clara's and Antonio's faces.

The square was a garden, but without any grass, just three huge red-yellow-red flower-beds. The municipal gardener— surely a flag fanatic, too—must have been the one who tended the round fountain, where dozens of red-yellow-red fishes were swimming among the lily-pads. But those lazy little beings, drifting in total anarchy, seemed to have escaped any attempt at discipline. Only with great effort could you imagine them lined up in red-yellow-red ranks, a living underwater flag. The gardener would probably be found drowned in the murky waters of his failure someday, and nobody would ever know why.

In the middle of the fountain stood a huge pedestal bearing a soldier mounted on a horse. Together, they formed a ludicrous assemblage of stone and bronze.

"Who's that?"

"That's him."

"Who do you mean, him?"

"Him! The one who is always talking on your father's radio!"

Shit! I had never expected to meet him like this, turned to stone on a bronze horse. Fossilized. Still, anything was possible. The stone statue of the Commander could speak, so why not him?

I looked him over carefully. He was short and fat, tricked out in ribbons, medals, and swords; his face was ordinary enough, with cold round eyes and the tiny, square moustache of a small-town gigolo. On his handsome horse, he

looked completely seedy; he should never have mounted it. Ironically, my brother remarked that the sculptor had unwittingly produced a masterpiece.

We walked around the square. Four avenues met there, each with its own monument. The main one led to the town hall, from whose balcony the speeches of great men fell on the common folk like noxious rain. (Another of my brother's remarks.) On its right stood the Clarentian convent. (Its ovens produced the most expensive cakes in town, which Mother ordered for the birthdays of her invisible clique of friends.) The civil war memorial was to the left. (Clara: ‘'My husband isn't on it, of course. He was a Red , so he doesn't count.")

Opposite the town hall—let's look for the symbol—the first doors of the whorehouses began. An old prostitute with lewd red lips, her hair lost to venereal disease, sat in a wicker chair hawking her wares. To look at her, you'd think she was doomed to failure, but she wasn’t. A well-dressed middle- aged man in gray had a word with her and disappeared into the shadow of a doorway, followed by the bloody-lipped vampire. It was a little early for that kind of business, Clara remarked, but I didn't see why. Antonio chuckled, and Clara tugged me fiercely by the hand. I felt she wanted to show me something, but didn't want to admit it.

We made a few architectural detours, played scarecrow in the midst of a flock of pigeons, and abruptly found ourselves facing the war memorial. It was built in trompe 1 'oeil; the arches of its facade were standing, but behind them, the main part of the structure was gone.

“The bombs, you know."

“What bombs?"

“The ones the German planes dropped, that were being tested during our war," explained my brother. “Didn't don Pepe tell you about that? It isn't official history."

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“Yes, he mentioned it. He told me they needed that war, our war, to test Hitler’s striking power.”

“That’s right. But be careful, and don’t talk about things like that so loud. The walls have ears.” (Again, the law of silence. I lowered my voice.)

“Why did you let that happen?”

I put my question to Clara. Of the two of them, she was the only one who could answer me. She had lived through the war, Clara the Wounded.

She looked at me a long time, a light of surprise in her eyes.

“In twenty years, that’s the first time I’ve heard anyone ask me that question. Besides myself, I mean. I’ve often wondered. And you know, I’ve never been able to come up with an answer. We had faith, of course, but we were innocent, too. I don’t think faith ever betrays you; innocence,

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yes. . .

The sigh she heaved seemed more like a conclusion than a regret. She changed the subject:

“Under the republic and during the war—nowadays, people always say fin the days of the Reds’—there was a big building here like the ones around the square, the People’s Cooperative. Everybody came to shop, and things were much cheaper than in the other stores in town. You could get food, clothes, tools, paper and pencils for school children, cradles for babies. Every time I went shopping in town, I stopped to look at a pale blue cradle ... I would have liked having a little boy. I didn’t have time.”

Her tone was beyond sadness. I had the impression that the only memory she had left was an image of a pale blue cradle, without any feelings. Twenty years is too long to go on feeling sorry.

“I’ll give you an example. One day, I came to the Cooperative to buy lipstick, but there wasn’t any. They went in for

practical things, see? And it was always crowded, like at a party/'

For a moment, an odd shadow of sadness slipped across my brother's face like a cloud, but he too was carefully listening to Clara. His affection for her was five years older than mine. Maybe she had always turned her frustrated mother’s love on him.

“Now look at what the party's turned into."

Like burned ruins, the half-darkened walls of arcades across the way were almost completely overgrown with moss, kept a brilliant green by the early morning sprinkling. Gigantism seemed to have hit the esplanade: no trees, no fountain, no equestrian statue, just an enormous flag made of red-yellow-red stones, as jarring as a bloodstain in the now-burning sunlight.

Noticing the sun, I asked, “What about your classes?" The overly aggressive presence of the flag made me want to flee.

“I'll go later. We’re playing tourist!"

I got a reassuring wink from Antonio, who could see right through me. I looked back at the esplanade. The war memorial seemed surprisingly simple, amid this orgy of triumph: just a gray marble cross silhouetted against the wide avenue beyond, its steps covered with wreaths, mostly laurel.

“Can we read what's written on the ribbons?"

“All that's on the ribbons is hate for two million dead and a few who are still alive. Better you didn't read them."

My brother spun me around, and we walked back to the square.

“All the victory parades and processions start from here, see. It's the center of town."

The square had filled up while we were looking at the memorial. People were coming and going, nannies pushing crying babies in strollers, maids walking fancy dogs, beggars asking coins from all and sundry, “for the love of God," po-

licemen keeping children from spoiling the red-yellow-red flower-flag. 1 had never seen so many people before, and held tight to Clara’s and Antonio’s hands.

But nobody looked at me, or asked where I’d popped in from. At most, a few envious eyes lit on my expensive clothes, without even rising as far as my face.

It was my first time in a crowd, and completely different from what I’d expected—if I had expected anything. After a while, the reason suddenly occurred to me: there wasn’t any sound. I mean any inner sound. Behind the old men’s talk, the children’s cries, the beggars’ entreaties, and the policemen’s orders, silence reigned. As if those words, cries, entreaties, and orders weren’t real. It was just like at home. My adventure in the outside world was a failure. Everything was appearances. It wasn’t a world at all, and certainly not a universe.

So that was why nobody seemed surprised at my presence. Neither they nor I had any reality. Someone had created the appearance of a world in which we were just appearances ourselves. And we were walking around in it (no point in using a more terrifying word), at the mercy of some unknown will that hadn't taken the trouble to imagine any other future for us.

I might as well have stayed home. What difference did it make?

We left the square, taking little alleys that led downward somewhere. The sidewalks gave way to huge paving stones, dented by rain and time. Every few yards, the miracle of a flowered patio could be glimpsed through a shadowy old gate, giving off a breath of sweet-smelling air. The freshly sprinkled ground was an invitation to stop and chat or work at some craftsman's task. But all that must happen at the end of the day—if it fact it did—not at ten in the morning.

The side streets still didn't seem to be leading anywhere, but we suddenly came out into a stone square baking in the

sun. No trees. No fountain. No statue. No flags. No shade. The bishop's palace stood to one side, ornate as a wedding cake; the rest of the square—and I mean all the rest—was filled by a huge medieval fortress: the cathedral.

"There are only two fortress-cathedrals in all Spain, and this is one of them," my brother announced with some pride—though I couldn't tell whether it was because of the cathedral itself, or the fact that he knew it was unusual.

The cathedral was as handsome as it was sinister. A long line of low, iron-barred windows showed at ground level; dungeons for heretics, no doubt. I didn't see the point of the bars, since even I couldn't have slipped through one of those windows; even a cat would have had a hard time escaping. (Of course the heretics must have been quite skinny in those days, whenever that was.)

Along the facade, you could see iron collars where the prisoners were chained, and the posts on which they were publicly tortured. The enormous, scorching square must have been crammed with people, praying to the Good Lord while they smacked their lips, enjoying the renegades' deaths. According to don Pepe, this was the Reconquest, the period when we tossed the Arab culture—the most beautiful civilization of all time—out the window.

My thoughts didn't appear to worry the cathedral overmuch. Its ramparts soared into the sky, so high that they must have been on speaking terms with the birds. And no decoration: the walls just ended in an abrupt horizontal line, without any towers or steeples, as blunt as a shipping dock.

"We'll go inside someday," said my brother. "You'll see, it's like being underground, like really being under the earth. You wouldn't believe that it only takes a few steps to get back to the surface again."

"That's because there aren't any windows," added Clara, looking clever.

Penultimate observation: through large round holes in the

ramparts, you could see the rusty black mouths of cast-iron cannons.

"What about those cannons?"

"They're just for decoration; they weren't ever used. I think they were put in to fill the holes. At school, you'll be treated to a monthly class in the town's history."

Last observation: oddly enough, not a single red-yellow- red flag flew from the stone colossus. Why not?

"Because . . ."

No explanation was given. Would I learn the answer in my monthly class in the town's history?

When we left, the stone square behind us was silent, almost deserted. I would have to come back alone some day, to try to figure out why the sight of so much dryness made my stomach knot with anxiety.

More side streets, and still no trees.

"Where does this street lead?”

"To the sea.”

I could already smell the salt and seaweed, when all at once I heard the shrieking of gulls, as if just mentioning the sea had set off a concert of signs.

My brother pointed to a once-handsome old building, now a gutted carcass. Fire had certainly got that one.

"The official seat of the Holy Inquisition, burned in a popular uprising in 1810. It was never rebuilt.”

I was starting to get a feeling for words. Spoken aloud, they would spontaneously give me ideas, and very often affected me physically. "Uprising,” for example, was a word that fired my blood and sent it burning along my veins. The moving flame would reach every part of my body, and convinced me that I would be a revolutionary some day. (To be continued?) "Popular uprising” were the most beautiful words I heard that morning. And my brother Antonio was the one who said them.

"I love you, Antonio.” (To be proven.)

And then there were the flies. They appeared in a vacant lot where gypsies were camped, surrounded by their regular retinue of chickens, pigs, and donkeys. Clara said that everything in the camp was stolen, but I didn't see how could they have stolen the baskets they were weaving out of young reeds split into four supple strands.

"The rest is stolen, not the reeds. They grow pretty much all over along the riverbanks, and they belong to everybody."

"Oh, I see."

So it was true. The gypsies must have stolen the swarms of flies that rose from one pile of manure to immediately land on another. With a silky buzz, the superbly disciplined flies all moved together in a dark gray cloud. The gypsies were master fly-raisers, and the flies followed them wherever they went. That must have been why I hadn't seen any in town.

Coming out of the vacant lot, my baptismal suit wasn't as clean as it had been at five-thirty that morning, and Clara started to complain. I gathered that it would cost her a few hours of washing and ironing. So we took a street that was perfectly appropriate for my shoes and suit—that is, clean.

At the end of that street we came out on the square with the church dedicated to the patron saint of the town and the school. Again, there were red-yellow-red flags (which no longer surprised me), but now a new side of social life greeted my eyes: groups of boys and girls filled the garden, the sidewalk, even the street. They were all talking aloud, so naturally that I felt as if I had finally left the realm of silence behind. Lord, how beautiful speech is! It made me a bit uneasy, but I liked it just the same. Antonio said hello to everybody, put his arm around my shoulders, and when he was asked why he had cut his morning classes, answered that he'd had to take me to the doctor.

THE CARNIVOROUS LAMB

"The kid brother’s growing up, isn’t he? We’re afraid he may be getting mumps.”

And he laughed at me, the liar.

All the same, it was great to be in the throng. I thought I noticed a few looks in the crowd lingering on my small person, and decided the

school suited me just fine. (I know what I’m thinking about.)

Finally, my brother said he couldn’t miss his other classes, kissed me on the lips (in front of everyone, the bastard!) and left us for his friends, prancing like a bullock mistaking a breeze for a windstorm (the figure of speech was Clara’s, who would bring out her peasant childhood and Andalusian ways now and then).

"Shall we go home?”

"What about the sea?”

Clara looked at me in surprise.

"I forgot, you’ve never seen the sea, have you, honey?”

As if suddenly aware of my cloistered childhood, she gave me a deep, pained stare. What could the sea be like, to do that to her?

She must have read my thoughts, and said:

"We’ll go walk by the seaside.” (Clara the Prisoner, too!) "Let’s go take a look.”

She livened up again. We walked down an acacia-lined avenue and crossed the beautiful harbor gardens (miraculously devoid of red-yellow-red flags). Before catching sight of the sea, I glimpsed sails and masts, gulls wheeling overhead, and other flags of different colors: the harbor.

Skiffs, boats, men shouting strange expressions as they worked, cranes and warehouses, trains and trucks loaded with orange crates and minerals of all kinds. A shrill whistle announced the departure of one ship, and another answered, apparently in the same language. Sea-birds bustled excitedly about. The dogs guarding the warehouses barked

like mad, and the wind carried all sorts of smells, from fish to myrrh. The sensations followed one another so quickly, I couldn't keep track

of them.

Out in the harbor, someone was drowning and yelling.

"Don't be silly, he's not drowning."

"What's he doing, then?"

"He's swimming."

So he was. I was thoughtful for a moment. I didn't know how to swim.

Observation: that first day in town showed me I still had a lot of things to learn.

We went home. Mother was waiting for us in the hallway, her eyes wide, as if she had awakened with a start. I saw a scream in her eyes about to burst out, but she controlled herself and said shortly:

"Fix the boy's meal right away. Don't forget that his classes start at one-thirty. The rest of us can wait."

She didn't add her usual "my dear." Crossly, Clara looked her right in the eye. Mother turned her back and went upstairs. I didn’t give a damn.

I was now obsessed with the thought that I had to find out everything about my town. I decided to question don Pepe, even if our math suffered. Later during the afternoon, as my senor teacher was launching into a brilliant explanation of square roots, I abruptly asked him my first question, about the red-yellow-red flags.

He threw down his chalk, looked at me, perhaps looked at himself as well, and gave a short, scornful answer:

"That's Franco's flag."

He fell silent and didn't stay for tea. Square roots fled my mind liked a whipped cat. "He who asks too many questions," said Clara, "winds up learning his disease."

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CHAPTERS

12 & 13

a T TIMES, when I knew everyone in the house

/-1 was busy and my absence wouldn’t be noticed, I JL -L started opening the little garden gate and slipping out into the mysteries of the town. I carefully avoided making any friends during those escapades; I didn’t want any eventual pals to come knocking on our door, asking if I wanted to go out with them. I was careful to keep the world of the town separate from that of the house, my family apart from everyone else.

As it was, my childhood had taught me not to mix things up, to keep all my experiences to myself—in short, to live a secret life. Just as I had special places in the house where I would go to hide from the others, or to think my own thoughts, I now preferred certain parts of the town that I knew Clara and Antonio didn’t go to—and they weren’t the kinds of places where the invisible coterie was likely to spot me, and say that my face looked familiar. (I was looking more like Mother every day.)

In that way, I got to know the town by myself, without a guide, and almost illicitly. Over time, that taste and hunger for everything illicit would become a symbol for me. In my own town, I could watch and observe without being recognized or called to; a kind of guaranteed impunity.

At the same time, my education, both religious and profane (to use don Gonzalo's word) was proceeding apace, but required more hours of study and much more concentration. Don Pepe and don Gonzalo, knowing that together they were masters of practically all my time, vied with each other to see who could make me spend the most hours in the old dining room upstairs, which Mother had fixed up for my homework and my catechism sessions with don Gonzalo. Thanks to a conspiracy perfectly engineered by Mother, the priest

never did cross paths in the house with “that disciple of the Devil, your teacher for other matters/' In that one sentence, don Gonzalo balanced scorn and hate so precariously, he could have been crowned the king of melodrama.

War was now being waged on three fronts. The first consisted of the senor specialist and me, by now almost traditional enemies. Mother's confessor and I formed the second, but since neither of us had learned the other's fighting style yet, we wasted a lot of time in skirmishes. The third front, finally, the one that shaped the three of us into a perfectly defined social unit, consisted on the one hand of me, the taught, and on the other hand of the two of them, the teachers. Hating each other as they did, I never understood how they managed to be in such perfect accord on their work methods and how to apply them.

I had my way of getting revenge, though. When they got too nasty with me, I would always remark with a look of surprise:

“Yes, senor. That's just what don Gonzalo" (or don Pepe) “says. And you must both be right, since you agree without even knowing each other. At least, as far as I know. Still, it’s funny. You're like two halves of an orange. It must be telepathy."

I would say this all at once, without pausing for breath, so

as not to give them time to answer. Then I would watch them redden to the point of exploding, and leave the room. Storms are best avoided. But I realized bitterly that I hadn’t yet found a way to make them really blow up, really make them apoplectic. And I never did. They must both be alive to this day, still torturing boys of "my sort” (Mother’s phrase) in some church or comfortable living room somewhere in town or in the country. Back then, I thought that causing their deaths without bloodying my hands would be the height of refinement. Mother would certainly have liked the device. At times, I thought she needed it, if only to destroy herself, or destroy Clara. But. . . well, it was a vain hope, like so many in this imperfect world.

Don Gonzalo threw himself into his missionary work with fire in his eyes and brimstone in his mouth. To hear him relentlessly bombarding me with prayers and commandments, Bible verses and quotations from the fathers of the Church, you would think death spied on me constantly and the "glowing gates of Hell" were waiting to swallow me if I didn't work hard to "turn away the misfortune that circumstances had laid on my head from earliest childhood." Don Gonzalo would seize that opportunity to talk of the "Reds" as though they were some awful calamity (predicted in the Bible, though I can't remember which verse), sent to earth by the Good Lord to punish our waywardness and show us the thorny, spotless path to virtue. Everything was grist for his mill, from the loss of our colonies ("when God abandoned America") to the civil war, by way of the three republics (which he shamelessly analogized to Saint Peter's three denials of Christ). The ceaseless persecution suffered during the war by churches and convents (with what don Pepe called their "specialized personnel," meaning priests, nuns, and monks) was almost always given a special chapter. The glory that the reigning Fascism (which don Gonzalo

called "the legitimate order") derived from all these events was boundless; words to describe it couldn't be dithyrambic enough, though the fucking priest knew the dictionary by heart. His "evangelization" could easily have become brainwashing if it hadn't been so exaggerated. On me, it had just the opposite effect.

Don Gonzalo reeked of wax and sweat, incense and dampness; together, they reminded me of the smell of death. Moreover, he had a dangerous habit of getting too close to me, probably figuring that my "evangelization" would be complete if our bodies shared communion as well. Since I didn't want to snitch to my brother about his advances, for fear of seeing the priest squashed like a bug, I had to change places every minute or so. One day, I very politely pointed out to him that my behind wasn't the seat of the third person of the

Holy Trinity, as his hot hand was apparently trying to get me to understand.

"The Devil didn't put those words in your mouth, by any chance?”

"Not at all, father. I'm sure the remark only came to mind because of your hand. I could be mistaken, but if we need to discuss it, I would rather we did it in front of my brother, my mother, and don Pepe, than with you alone.”

He turned his hot gaze on me and gritted his teeth. No doubt about it: he didn't want to discuss that with anyone, not even me. He suspected me of having impure thoughts, and his mission consisted of enlightening me on a number of points, notably sin. Given that my childhood had been spent lost in darkness, I very likely had no conception of what sin was, and he had taken on the job of making it all clear to me without delay. So a single rule guided his behavior: make up for lost time. There was no point in making a mountain out of a molehill, or trying to see beyond the end of my nose. Malice is no small sin, even if only a venial one.

So I learned that I could amuse myself for a long time at

those poor guys’ expense, with their hidden fire and hypocrisy, if I wanted to. (To be continued.)

Needless to say, Mother’s confessor never managed to make God known to me, and I don’t think he really tried. He hardly ever spoke of Him, and when he did I had the feeling that he was talking about a stranger and didn’t realize it. His mission and concern was the Church, and when we finally went our separate ways, that was what I knew the most about. I learned from him that to live, you don’t need God if you truly belong to the Church. To live—and I want to stress this—all you need is doctrine, and the one provided by the Catholic Church is the most complete, the most sophisticated, and the most controversial. Also the furthest from God, but that’s to be expected. Since the whole package is designed to meet man’s needs—repentance, despair, and nastiness—I don’t see why God should

even be involved. I was a consciously fervent Catholic for a few years myself, and I thank Catholicism for finally helping me understand that God doesn't exist.

As for don Gonzalo himself, he was less concerned with teaching me what I needed to know to pass the high school entrance exam than with preparing me for a general confession by the book, with my first communion right afterward.

Mother had already set the date: March 21, the first day of spring.

"I want it to be like a rosebud's first blossoming for him," she told our confessor cynically.

"Will you give a party?"

"I'm going to think about it," Mother answered, her face shining like a summer moon, her tone of voice giving the impression that she found the idea completely charming. In fact, she had already made up her mind: there would be no party, and I would take my first communion at our house in the country.

"But my daughter, a first communion must be celebrated in a church, not in secret. It must be a public act, done not only in the sight of God, but also in the eyes of men/'

Don Gonzalo was obviously trying to force Mother, and maybe Father as well, to show themselves publicly in church. It would have been a triumph for him, a vivid application of what he was always saying about "lost sheep/ 7 He may even have dreamed of roping don Pepe and Clara in, to round out the party. But he wasn't reckoning with Mother's vagueness, or the supreme willpower of someone who is already dead. Ever since hearing her confession to Clara a few years before, I knew that nothing could touch her. She accepted only her own ways of destroying, and taking us all to church wouldn't have been an act of anarchy, but quite the reverse; she wanted to force don Gonzalo to serve me the body and blood of Christ at home.

"You know, father, the more we show our humility, the closer we get to the gates of Heaven, which I fully intend to enter. That is why I have decided that the child's first communion will take place in our country house. Right next door on my estate there is a little chapel that goes back to my grandmother's time, which our workers have long used as a storage shed. For tools, you know, and also to raise my favorite breed of chicken. So I've ordered it cleaned and prepared for the ceremony. Everything we need is at the house: crucifixes, altar cloths, candelabras, and even a very large, handsome fount; up to now, it has been used to grow flowers in."

"You're talking about a whole string of sacrileges, my daughter!"

"Don't be childish, father. Your ministry allows you to wipe out any sacrilege with a simple blessing. And who knows, after the little one's first communion, maybe the chapel won't be used as a shed or chicken-house anymore. Anything can happen, these days. Can I count on you?"

"If you are asking me as a minister of the Church . .

"Of course, father."

"In that case, you can count on me."

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart. A car has already been rented to pick you up on the evening of the twentieth; the trip will only take a few hours. You will spend the night there. I have ordered a room made ready for you. I assume you will bring everything you need for the ceremony, or would you like me to take care of it?"

Don Gonzalo's answer couldn't have been sharper:

"No, daughter, I'll take care of it myself." (He was probably afraid Mother would also take charge of blessing the host.)

In that way, I learned that we would be leaving the house for a week and going to the country for the first time in my life. My brother

occasionally used to spend a few days of his vacations there. "No, you can't take your little brother with you. His health isn't up to such a change. He is staying at home.” For years, I had heard Mother repeat that sentence without ever changing a single word. I had gotten the idea that the country was drafty, or something.

During the following days, a swarm of delivery boys trooped through the hallway, and Clara complained all day long about the dirt they left on the carpet.

"That's all I need. Don’t I have enough work to do already?”

She glared at me like an angry rooster, as if I were responsible for all the comings and goings.

"But what the hell does all this have to do with me?”

"It's your first communion, isn't it? I'm not the one who is going to be deceived into the bosom of the Church,' as senora your mother puts it!”

"Poor Clara, you’re nothing but an atheist.”

"I’m just a bitch, is what I am. A bitch of a mule that just works and works my whole bitching life.”

There, the best I could do was to make myself scarce.

In any case, I had too much work, too, swamped as I was by the educational fury of my two teachers. Otherwise, I would have understood "poor Clara's" despair. To her, the Church was nothing but an endless source of misfortunes. Each time she saw don Gonzalo cross the hall to go upstairs, Clara would grab her big fly sprayer and spray the whole house. Antonio, who was getting ruder by the day, laughed like a maniac.

"It stinks of priests in here/' Clara would mutter between her teeth. "It’s like smelling hell/'

Don Gonzalo would race up the stairs as fast as he could.

What with work, packages arriving every day—I was dying to find out what was in them, but Mother said they were not to be opened until further notice (Clara reported the phrase)—the phone ringing constantly whenever Mother wasn't glued to it, giving the invisible coterie the "good news" (that was how she described my first communion), and explaining her subtle reasons for only celebrating the ceremony within the family, ("No, there won't be a reception, so there's no need to send presents."), Father's clients furtively slipping in and out, thinking the house had gone crazy, Antonio becoming more and more insatiable at night, ever since his skillful caresses had made me come for the first time, me clinging to his body, more aware than ever of how deeply I reached him, my unrelenting war with don Pepe and don Gonzalo, my shameless way of showing up in front of them with hardly anything on and pretending I was properly dressed, the questions I asked them, looking innocent, about the hairs that were starting to grow around my penis, which, for that matter, was unexpectedly getting hard several times a day . . .

Don Pepe: "You'll find out about that when the time is right. Now, let's get to work!"

Don Gonzalo: "Good Lord, one doesn’t talk about those things—it’s a sin! Do you play with yourself?”

Playing dumb, I would say, "But if you don’t explain these things to me, who will? I don’t have any friends.”

"Friends, indeed! I’ll speak to your father.”

They both wound up giving me that answer every time, yet Father’s office door never opened to supply me with the desired explanation of the "mysteries of nature.” (Was that don Pepe’s phrase, or don Gonzalo’s?)

In a word, the day before my first communion I was out of my head with excitement.

We left the house and the town very early in two rented cars, the first for Mother, my brother, and me, the other for Clara and a ridiculous amount of baggage. You would think we were headed for the ends of the earth and not coming back for years, instead of a week. There were even two roosters in Clara's car, their legs trussed up, to be bred with the hens in the country to produce double-yolk eggs (!?!).

For a good part of the trip, Mother and Antonio carried on a knowledgeable discussion on the subject. The driver, an old guy who was none too bright, kept saying that the world was going to ruin (I don't think he understood the point of having eggs with two yolks. He felt nothing was better than a good pair of old-fashioned ones), and that the Americans, what with their bombs and stuff, etc. He started describing in detail a news item from Madrid: a prostitute (a "loose woman," as he put it) had been found tied up in a cheap hotel with her breasts chewed off by a black American soldier. She had died in the hospital.

Mother didn't seem too interested in the story, and the driver and my brother gradually got involved in a rambling political discussion about the country's American bases, a topic on which neither seemed too well informed. The driver said that they just lined certain people's pockets.

Without denying the point, Antonio said there were political reasons, too.

"Spain is the gateway to Africa, you know/'

"Don't talk to me about Africa. That's where he's from, the fat pig!"

Mother cut them off, saying she couldn't allow politics to be discussed in her husband's absence. (For the life of me, I couldn't understand why.)

“How is it that he didn’t come with you?”

“Business.”

“And it isn’t easy to get my father together with a priest. You know how he is.”

“Yeah, I know. What a guy!”

They all knew each other, apparently. In fact, my father had chosen not to attend my “spiritual initiation.” (Don Gonzalo’s words.)

“Father, now that you will be calling at the house, please do me a favor and don’t go into my husband’s study to offer him your blessing. Let’s celebrate the ceremony quietly.” (Mother’s advice, when it was decided her confessor would take my religious education in hand.)

For me, going to the country was an adventure. Earth, water, stone, a different air and light, animals and trees in their natural state. None of those close-cropped trees and deeply bored birds that dotted the town and its squares, as disciplined as soldiers. With their pruned branches and their leaves hacked away so as not to impinge on the precious views, they looked as if they had just come from the barber’s. None of those mares looking like beaten-down slaves, their ears flat against their heads, that pulled the few remaining horse-drawn wagons, and made the town look like a squalid flea market. (During one of my solitary escapades, I had heard someone say that they were part of the town’s charm.)

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More than anything, the country would be a new place to live. Bedrooms, parlors, stairs that I would have to discover and practically invent, adapt to my gaze and movements, neither vex nor irritate by my presence. Instead, I would have to slip surreptitiously among the vibrations of love and hate you always find in old houses.

My first surprise, a few minutes after we arrived, was discovering that the country house was an exact replica of our house in town, or vice versa. Only a few details—furniture, paintings, a few stray objects—were different. I felt I was looking at the negative of a familiar photograph, and my chest tightened with despair. Wouldn't there ever be any real change in my life? Why was I forever encountering the clumsy copy of an eternal original? Or the faded original of a series of reproductions scattered at random? Was it a sickness of the family? The town? The whole country? I never found answers to all those questions, but ever since I was very young, I've suspected that Spain and life itself were nothing but the work of a copying machine that never broke down.

The only original things at the country house were Mother's woven wicker armchair and her yellow rosebush. And the peasants, of course, who came and went, and whose harsh voices miraculously didn't get on Mother's nerves. Quite the opposite: she was charming with them, and had brought presents for everybody. You felt she was at the nerve-center of her domain, giving gifts with an open hand, a smile on her lips. The only drawback was that nobody knew what the hell to do with a satin bedside lamp, since there wasn't any electricity in their huts, or a hand-held shower head—the last word in hygiene —without running water.

After days like that, Mother would collapse exhausted into her wicker armchair, her hands gripping the twin doves

that decorated the armrests, and melt like hot wax, etc. But she wasn't to blame. It was just another case of circumstances.

I was supposed to spend two days in contemplation, erasing from my conscience any image foreign to my new status as a Christian. This would open the way to that other eventuality, that unimaginable greatness (as don Gonzalo put it), becoming an active, consenting Catholic. Those two days were all I had in which to examine all my sins deeply—my confessor was sure I had a whole slew of them. Having done so, I was to show up for my general confession the evening before my first communion, at the hour of the last angelus.

Since the only church for twenty miles around didn't much respect the order of the day, don Gonzalo had to explain reluctantly that the last angelus meant seven o'clock sharp.

Mother seemed to take all this quite seriously, and firmly forbade my brother's taking me on a tour of "our property."

"The less you bother him these two days, the better it will be for him and his conscience. You'll have plenty of time afterward."

What I hadn't expected was Antonio's immediate disappearance from the house; he turned up only at mealtimes, if at all. I was given the room that matched our bedroom in town, but Clara made up my brother's bed in a room that corresponded to Father's study. Being so brutally separated from Antonio made me thirst for revenge. The bed, where I practically drowned in my lonely sweat, seemed huge and deserted. (The very same bed that I carefully made up at one minute past five last Friday, and which may prove to be either my life- or death-warrant when you arrive.) My hands went to the places where I was used to feeling my brother's touch. They found nothing but a soft desert, and stiffened with tension, like lizards' tails chopped off with a stick. In vain, my back searched for my brother's chest, belly, thighs,

where it had always rested. At night, my body felt so cut off from my brother’s, I was sure it would stop working. Sweat ran off my skin as if I were nothing but some old pipe; my body was emptying itself through my open pores in a slow hemorrhage, not of tears, but of sweat.

I woke up pale and thin, a ghost of myself. Either I had shrunk, or my clothes had grown larger. Everybody thought I was taking my examination of conscience very seriously. Mother looked at me with delight, and I thought I glimpsed in her eyes a hint of admiration at how well I was playing the game. Only Clara worriedly asked me whether I had slept all right.

"Yes.”

"You know, honey . . . anyway, you don’t really believe everything in this world is a sin, do you?”

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No.

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"Then don’t worry. I think you’re as clean as the laundry I wash.”

Sure.

I was answering her questions, but looking around for my brother. He was nowhere to be found, neither in the rooms I could see through the open doors, nor in the garden when I looked out the window. His bed was rumpled and empty, so he had slept.

A car bearing the black blotch of don Gonzalo came to the house that afternoon. Nothing else to report. Only the despair of time standing still, and absence —his absence.

Before dinner, at seven in the evening, don Gonzalo received me as planned in a corner of the library, which Mother had turned into a confessional with burgundy velvet drapes, a monk’s chair, and a prie-dieu. After giving me his blessing, don Gonzalo started the interrogation.

In the beginning, the questions were surprisingly banal. White lies, petty thefts (my confessor didn’t seem to realize that we rich children didn’t steal money), secret glances at

certain books without my elders’ permission, stubbornness toward Mother, acts of disobedience toward everybody, Clara excepted. None of it seemed too serious, and I found myself gradually getting drowsy and bored. Then we suddenly started in on the subject of nakedness.

"I understand you have been sleeping with your brother, ever since you were very small.” (Mother the snitch.)

"Yes, father.”

"That isn’t too serious, considering the bonds that unite you. But haven’t you ever felt a contact, perhaps an odd one, between your body and his, through your pajamas?”

"We don’t sleep in pajamas, father. We have a few pairs, tailor-made and monogrammed, but we don’t use them. That is a sin of vanity and needless luxury I wanted to confess.”

"That isn’t very harmful to the soul’s health, my son. But through your underpants . . . wasn’t there something that probably shocked or, who knows, disgusted you? Your brother is much older and more developed than you.”

"No underpants, father.”

"Naked?”

"Yes.”

"Both of you?”

"Yes, and it’s always been that way. Would you like me to describe my brother’s surprising development, through my child’s eyes?”

"No! Does he . . . love you very much?”

"Yes, father. Is that a sin?”

"Perhaps, my son, perhaps. It all depends on the way you sleep. The most apparently innocent actions can be dictated by that rascal, the Devil.”

"Then I’ll explain, father, and you can decide. I get scared very easily, and have since I was very little. And I get cold easily. My

brother must have understood all that when I was a baby. He took me to bed with him, and never put

me back in my cradle. In any case, I would scream if he tried to, to tease me.”

“Tried to what, my son?”

“Tried to put me back in my cradle.”

“Oh. Those are just the little sins of a spoiled child; they're not important. And you would see transformations in your brother, from time to time?”

“Not from time to time, father. Every night.”

“Explain what you mean, my son.”

“I don't know exactly what you want to know.”

“Everything, my son. When you make a general confession, you have to tell everything.”

“Sins, father?”

“My son, there are very few things in this nether world that are not sins. But the sinner isn't objective. Objective judgment is on the side of the confessor, thank God.”

“ Touché , father. Mea culpa. Sometimes I don't feel like it.”

“Feel like what, my son?”

“Feel like being scared or cold twice in one night.”

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“Or three times.”

“But don’t you realize . . .”

“Realize what, father?”

“The way he's warming you up, my son?”

“Oh yes, father! Ten minutes afterward, I'm sweating, panting, even. It’s better than the calisthenics he does by himself. At least he sweats more than when he exercises. I've always told him so.”

“My son, do you know the word ‘fornication,’ by any chance?”

“Sorry, no, father. On the other hand, I know the word dove.' My brother taught it to me. By the way, father, do you wear pants, or at least underpants, under your cassock?”

“Why do you ask, my son?”

"Because you've got a hard-on, just like my brother when I snuggle up to him."

"Do you want to see for yourself?"

"No, father. I'm in a very awkward position, kneeling like this. It's right under my nose, and it smells bad. You don’t wash yourself. My brother washes, and he smells good . . . all over."

"Would you like me to wash, and come to your room tonight, to continue this confession?"

"No, father. I just want you to give me absolution for my sins. I’m hungry."

"Not so fast, my little friend. I still have a few more questions about sin for you. Tell me, does your father have visitors?"

"Ask him."

"He listens to the radio."

"Yes."

"What does he listen to?"

"A pretty well-known thing about victory and peace. It’s on almost every day."

"Have you heard it?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you like it?"

"It’s very, very beautiful."

"That’s a good way to be absolved of your sins, or almost. But what does he say about it?"

"I don’t talk with my father."

"But he talks with the others; your brother, the maid, your mother . . .”

"Then go ask my mother."

"A saint."

"A saint."

"Have you ever heard Radio Pyrenees or Radio Moscow playing in your father’s study, late at night?"

"Haven’t heard them. At night, I’m cold or scared. I’m in bed with my brother. Mea culpa"

"Does he talk on the phone with his friends?”

"You mean my father?”

"Yes, your father."

"The telephone is Mother's exclusive domain."

"Does he ever get together with friends in the evening, to play cards?"

"In the evening, I take a bath with my brother, or else I'm asleep. Mea culpa , father."

"Well, all right. Have you ever heard him talk about a gentlemen called Franco?"

"Hey, I saw him once, sitting petrified on a horse. He seems to be pretty well known, doesn't he?"

"... saying he was a killer, for example, or a son of a bitch?"

"No, father. You're the first person ever to tell me that. Can I say that in my next confession, if it isn't with you?"

"No! And the maid, you've never heard her say anything along those lines?"

"The maid, father, is called Clara. And she's dead. Do you understand, dead! She died of sorrow, loneliness, and disgust. And also of defeat. Dead! Now absolve my sins, father, or I'll start yelling for help. Mother can't be very far away."

"Your mother, a saint!"

"She's a sainted bitch. And I'm her son, don't you forget

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"Did that bastard don Pepe teach you to talk that way?"

"Why don’t you go ask him? And ask him all your other questions? Maybe he knows something about it.”

" Ego te absolvo ...”

I piously crossed myself.

At suppertime, Mother said, "My son Antonio will help

you celebrate Mass tomorrow. He can even give the responses in Latin, which would be just the right touch/’

“Miserere nobis,” my brother answered very calmly, a slight smile playing on his lips. (Without looking at me.)

Another solitary night, eyes and pores open.

The next morning, her face dirty and full of sleep, Clara ran the water in the bathtub, then came to my room to get me up, because the big deal was about to begin. She helped me with my bath.

"They don’t call it a bath, sweetie. On occasions like this, it’s called 'ablutions.’ I heard senora your mother talking about it with the priest earlier.”

Clara refilled the tub, and poured a bottle of something into it.

"What’s that?”

"Rosewater, recommended by your confessor. He can’t celebrate Mass without being surrounded by that perfume.”

"If you knew how he stinks!”

"I know perfectly well. They’re all pigs. You’re aren’t the first to tell me that.”

She poured another bottle in.

"And that?”

"Holy water, recommended by your mother. 'All’s fair in love and war,’ I think she said.”

I climbed back into the tub. Clara pulled a watch out of her apron pocket and looked at it.

"Seven minutes. She said it’s a magic number. For good luck, I think.”

I started to shiver, and Clara had to cut at least two minutes off the magic time. After a good rub with the towel, she blow-dried my hair and we went back to my room, where she started opening packages. Cotton knit underwear appeared, followed one by one by a white lace shirt, white alpaca suit, white velvet bow tie, white silk socks, white

pumps, and white kid gloves. I was done up like a meringue ("Better looking than a fresh cheese/' said Clara). She stood me in front of the mirror and spent a long time staring at me, not saying a word, with a sort of chill in her look. Then she pushed me toward the door and we went down to the parlor for the final touches at Mother's hands.

Using a pearl-headed gold pin, Mother fastened a white silk ribbon with doves and chalices embroidered in gold thread on the left sleeve of my jacket. She gave me a prayer- book bound in mother-of-pearl with more golden doves and chalices, and finally a gold and mother-of-pearl rosary. Mother also strapped a gold watch on my wrist, and for some reason sprayed me all over with deodorant and cologne.

"It's going to be a hot day. I don't want to see any flies on your clothes." I understood.

With fluttering fingers, Mother spread a special cream under my eyes.

"You're too pale. After all, you're a boy, not a bride."

I looked at her in silence.

Mother had outdone herself. She was wearing black, as usual, but had strewn herself with pearls—earrings, necklace, rings, and bracelet—and put on a black lace mantilla that spread out from her shell comb like a funeral bouquet with pearl-headed pins for pistils. She was wearing black gloves with raised doves and chalices, and carried a black marble missal and rosary.

The two of us set out for the chapel, followed by Clara, who had refused even to take off her kitchen apron. Neither my brother nor my confessor was around. Walking along a stone path that the peasants had spent hours sweeping and sprinkling, lest a stray weed or a speck of dust dirty my shoes, I was sure I had wandered into a world of schizophrenics. Behind us, Clara groused that it was really a great

day to go for a picnic, and not to fast for a couple of hours in a chapel that still stank of chicken shit.

"I used up two bottles of bleach, you know."

"By the way, did you bring my atomizer?"

"Yes."

"Thank God, you think of everything."

Clara made a very tasteless crack about the habit we had all picked up these last months, of invoking the Lord's name on every occasion. "You'd think we were in a convent."

Mother pretended not to hear.

After ten minutes' walk, we came to a somewhat strange- looking enclosure.

"This is the family cemetery," Mother explained. "My parents, my grandparents, and all their ancestors are buried here. Some day, you'll have the chance to read their names, ages, and causes of death on the tombstones. It's good marble; the inscriptions haven't worn away."

Mother's talkativeness surprised me, as well as the fact that she considered her great-grandparents to be her parents' ancestors, but not her own. I thought it must have been the diseases that killed them, which she didn't deem worthy of her family; you never know what you can pick up in the ports of Singapore or Macao!

When we finally reached the chapel, a procession of peasants had assembled. It didn't look as if it was going to be a private ceremony after all, as Mother had led the invisible coterie to believe. And what Clara had said about the chicken droppings turned out to be true. But cows, mules, and pigs had left excrement, too; together, they made the place smell like a manure-pile.

The expression on the faces of the peasants, who must have been used to Mother's eccentricities, was worth seeing. You read astonishment in their eyes, and a holiday smile on their lips.

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In a word, something under the soft sunshine of this first day of spring was just too much. It was either them or us, but it certainly wasn't my idea of harmony.

Since the springtime softness wasn't enough to perfume the barnyard atmosphere, Mother set about spraying everything. All the breeze carried to us were rotten smells, dominated by the heavy stench of moldering straw.

It was even worse inside the chapel. A coat of whitewash, tons of Andalusian sugared flowers, and a burning censer made the air so thick you couldn't breathe; wax from dozens of lighted candles supplied the crowning touch.

As far as I could see, it was a typical cemetery chapel, bare as a tombstone. No artist's hand had painted frescoes on the walls, and the ceiling didn't suggest the brightness of heaven so much as the darkness of hell; just one small round window allowed a shaft of sun- or moonlight to fall on the cold slab bearing some old wreath of artificial flowers. Nobody had thought to set up an oil lamp with an eternal flame, of course.

The altar, flat and square as a sarcophagus, was covered with rich white embroidered cloth cascading heavily to the floor. Beautifully decorated ceramic vases held antique artificial flowers that Mother kept wrapped in tissue somewhere in the country-house closets, waxed organdy flowers handmade by anonymous nuns. Brass and silver candelabras, as intricate as African headdresses, gleamed in the darkness, thanks to the labor of peasant hands. A large missal decorated with brightly colored miniatures, which don Gonzalo had surely brought from town. An ivory crucifix whose gaze seemed alive, staring at us. A large, handsome Chinese box inlaid with mother-of-pearl (exotic birds in impossible flight through a grove of bamboos and young ladies with slanted eyes peeping from beneath parasols), which don Gonzalo had been forced to use to store the ciborium, where the

body of Christ had lain all night long. How was it that such a huge God, who filled the entire universe all by Himself, could be locked up in a Chinese box no bigger than a canary cage? A mystery. There's an answer worthy of a Catholic, I thought.

Two mahogany prie-dieux with red velvet upholstery had been set before the altar for Mother and me to kneel on. To keep us from getting tired during the long service, two yellow satin cushions, into which our knees softly sank, had been added.

In the juxtaposition of these two colors, I was horrified to spy a cunning version of the national flag. Maybe don Gon- zalo had created it so that no one would miss the edifying parable of the son of a known republican taking his first communion under the auspices of Victory and Peace. I made up my mind to accept it all as a liturgical delirium expressed with whatever was at hand.

Like Mother, I dipped my fingers in the holy water and crossed myself very broadly. (The opulence of the gesture, I learned later, is a mark of elegance that sets the Catholic upper middle class apart from the common people. That expression, the "common people," was something I learned not from someone who had stepped straight out of the fifteenth century, but from an Asturian fag who washed dishes with me in a London restaurant. He was the son of a "very good family" whose financial reverses had forced the heir to emigrate beyond the sea. You find everything in the vineyards of the Lord.)

Mother and I sat down on armchairs behind the two prie- dieux. We were very calm, very serene, and as far as I was concerned, very out of it all.

Without warning, don Gonzalo came out from behind the altar wearing white and gold, a lump of coal disguised as a diamond. His palms were piously joined, his eyes lowered, his eyebrows thinning more than ever toward his temples.

He was closely followed by Antonio, who carried an endlessly smoking censer. No music accompanied them.

So there he was, two days after his almost total disappearance, and his complete absence from my bed! Ignoring Mother's sideways glance, I examined my brother at length. I tried to put only cold analysis in my look, but his beauty made me so dizzy I almost dropped my little mother-of- pearl book, which was opened to the introit.

He was wearing a navy blue suit, a dark blue shirt, and a cream-colored tie. He seemed bigger and huskier, hiding his too-blue eyes behind half-closed lids. He had become a man, I realized for the first time, a reincarnation of young Carlos the way he looked in the wedding picture of my parents that Clara kept on her dresser. He had a very special look, that air of maturity that emanates from someone who has made a final decision. I would have dearly loved to know what it was.

Though she hadn't moved, I felt Mother was losing her usual composure beside me. I looked from my brother to her, and saw she was wearing a smile whose passionate, luminous vibrations eclipsed everything. Mother loved her son Antonio, my brother. His presence brought back her memory of passionate young Carlos leaning against an elm tree, waiting for a young girl to join him in the darkness of the night. Against my will, I felt myself her son.

The Mass began, the Latin revealing its magic power and enchanting me, breaking down all my resistance. Nowhere in the chapel could I discern the presence of God, but the Church was playing with velvet fingers on my weakness for mystery and ritual. Within me, my brother's presence stirred a craving for apocalypse. The Latin words falling softly from his lips tickled the most secret parts of my body, as if he were speaking directly to me and not to God. When Mother and I approached the altar, his eyes suddenly widened to look at me, and the storm of my desire left me so

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limp I almost fell to my knees on the prie-dieu. He ran a wet tongue over his lips, and I unconsciously followed suit. He was giving signs of life, and I signs of death.

Even when he turned back to the altar, ceremonious at the heart of the ceremony, I felt his gaze still on me, seeing me beyond all appearances. My image was in his eyes, and nothing could erase it, neither objects, nor other people, nor even my absence. I was in him, merged with him. My joy was even greater than God's, in the event that God's joy is really infinite, as they say.

The little silver bell my brother had been masterfully ringing announced that the elevation was near. Don Gon- zalo consecrated the wine and lifted the chalice, consecrated the host and raised the holy disc above his head. In the total silence, I didn't try to grasp the mystery of the transubstan- tiation, but let myself be rocked by the waves of a vague worry. My brother knelt next to the altar to take communion. He looked straight at don Gonzalo, whose hand I thought I saw tremble. I deduced that Antonio must have confessed to him that very morning, and the matter of our relations had certainly arisen. The priest looked out of sorts; my brother's confession must have been a stormy one. I felt like consoling the priest, telling him that after all, sin was his domain, and that it would be harder for him to move through a world of grace than for a trout to swim in a mud puddle. But my impulse went unsatisfied.

Together, they came over to where Mother and I were kneeling. Don Gonzalo bravely put on an expression of boundless ecstasy. Reciting his Latin phrases slowly and distinctly, he gave Mother communion. Then he moved in front of me, with Antonio on his right holding a little silver plate inlaid with gold under my chin, in case the host should drop from a clumsy mouth. That idea instantly sprang to

mind, and I heard the Good Lord give a terrified yelp. From my mouth to the ground wasn't very far, but it was a drop

just the same. I couldn’t help wondering why God should have such an irrational fear of heights, since he had been dwelling in space for time without end, amen. I opened my mouth, and the body of Christ lay languidly on my tongue; waves of saliva washed over my teeth. The evening before, my confessor had warned me under no circumstances to swallow the host before it melted completely in my mouth, and above all not to bite into it, lest a spurt of the Savior’s blood choke me forever. But now I was afraid of drowning in the rush of saliva that filled my mouth.

To don Gonzalo’s astonishment, my brother Antonio knelt down in front of me and very slowly kissed me on the lips, saying, "Take it easy, kid.” (Very low.)

Mother raised her head and smiled. She had given birth not to one cataclysm, but two, and she was proud of it.

Because of that look of pride, certainly, don Gonzalo raced through the rest of the Mass, as if he had suddenly realized that it was too late to stand on ceremony. And we all returned to the house for my first communion breakfast.

Long tables had been set out in the hallway, parlor, and kitchen, laden with hors d’oeuvres, fancy cakes, and several of those large earthenware jugs that are used to store olives from one year to the next, now filled with a deluxe champagne and fruit sangria. Mother must have secretly set every nun in the vicinity to work cooking or baking.

Just as I was wondering how the five of us could possibly eat all that, a long parade of peasants who worked on Mother’s estate appeared in the garden’s main walkway. The line was headed by Clara, keeping order in a voice like a sergeant-major’s. As best she could, Clara got them all to file by to give me the traditional coin—the symbol of a somewhat secular joy—after which they threw

themselves on the goodies like a pack of wolves. Mother laughed with delight, and kept telling them to watch out for indigestion.

"At times like these, I feel more at ease with them than

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with my own friends/' she confided to don Gonzalo. "I can't stand people who just pick at their food."

"They are the Lord's children, too, my daughter."

"I'm perfectly aware that my friends are the Lord's children, father."

"I didn't mean them, daughter."

"Who, then?"

"Your workers."

"But, father, I never doubted it," answered Mother, an elegant smile on her lips.

And Clara, who just happened to be passing, put in her two cents' worth:

"Just forgotten children, that's all."

"Do you feel the Lord has forgotten you, my daughter?" asked the priest, showing his cannibal's teeth.

"I don't feel anyone has forgotten me. I'm dead, and the dead don't need anyone to remember them."

She came over and kissed me on both cheeks:

"But this one's alive!"

Her laughter burst out amid the cheers of the peasants, their mouths and pockets full. Over the clamor, I heard our confessor asking Mother:

"My daughter, are you sure you pay enough attention to your employees' religious duties? I hope you have understood at last how important it is to bring order to faith and the practice of the faith after a civil war."

The remark was so tactless, Mother didn't bother to answer.

When the procession was over, Antonio came up to me, took my hand, and slipped a finely-wrought gold ring onto my finger: a heart was cut into the stone, with our initials and the date inscribed on the band.

"The date of my first communion? Is it really that important to you?"

“I wouldn’t have thought so. I haven’t seen you in two days.”

"You’ll find out later why today’s date is so important. Now we’re going for a walk; I’m going to show you our property.”

"Our property.” An odd expression, I thought, having never felt that anything of Mother’s belonged to me. But my brother thought otherwise.

Without comment, Mother and don Gonzalo watched us go outside. Things seemed to be returning to normal. I had gotten back my place in my brother’s world, and he once again held sway over me.

Outside on the big terrace, Antonio described the extent of "our property,” and asked me to choose which way to go.

"Show me whatever you want to. You’re the one who knows.”

Taking me by the hand, he set out for a dry hill that looked as if it had been scorched by the sun since the beginning of time. Surrounded by rocks, covered with dust, it was like some dead planet, awesome

and beautiful. A pair of unusually bold crows were hopping from rock to rock.

"What are they doing?”

"They’re hunting for snakes.”

"Are there snakes here?”

My voice must have sounded a bit shaky, because Antonio started laughing. "Yes, thick as ropes. But don’t worry, they’re not poisonous.”

"I’m not afraid.”

"Good. Do you see that mountain over there? That’s where the spring I want to show you is.”

"Do you think we can get there today?”

"It’s an hour’s walk. Don’t you think you can do it?”

"Of course I can.”

"Well, let’s go!”

Taking a twisting path, we left the hill with the snakes

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behind, and walked for a long time under olive trees and walnut trees loaded with young walnuts, where the going was easier. A light breeze tried to show that it was springtime, and cool, but it didn’t really succeed. Crickets abruptly stopped chirping as we passed. My brother caught one in the hollow of his hand and gave it to me. I took it with a kind of respect; it was like holding a living piece of wood. The cricket started flapping its wings, and I let it go, but Antonio didn’t laugh, the way he usually did. He seemed distracted. Walking

across "our property” was no fun at all, I decided, and took a very obvious look at my gold wristwatch.

"We’ve been walking for more than an hour.”

"We still have a ways to go. It’s a little further, you know. I told you an hour so as not to scare you off.”

I fell silent.

"If you’re tired, I can carry you on my shoulders.”

"I’m not tired, and I’m not five years old anymore, for you to be carrying me piggyback.”

"That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

But after another half hour’s walk through the vineyards, being careful not to dirty my fancy clothes, I found I had to hang onto my brother’s arm. He took my hand and gave me the first passionate kiss I’d had in all these last two endless days. It excited him right away, and I started to feel better. I became more talkative, and didn’t miss a single detail of our walk.

We finally reached the top of the mountain at about eleven in the morning. It was as rocky as the hill with the snakes, but the perfect blue of the sky lent it a kind of peaceful beauty. Overhead two eagles were gliding so slowly they looked as if they were out for a stroll.

Out of breath—I was, at least—we reached the entrance to an old mine, surrounded by jonquils, mosquitoes, and dragonflies. Cool grass grew around it in an excess of tender-

ness, and a gray rabbit darted off when he spotted us. A channeled stream ran down toward “our property/’

Antonio pulled out a flashlight and announced that we were going into the mine.

“Isn’t it kind of dark in there?”

“You’re with me, aren’t you?”

He seemed angry or impatient; it wasn’t like him.

We went about three hundred yards in the dark, with me following, stooped over and clutching his hand. Bats hugging the stone walls stirred restlessly in the beam of light; they gave me the shivers. Then I suddenly saw a glow, and soon blinding sunshine at the end of the darkness. I assumed that it was another entrance to the mine, but I was wrong. When we got closer, I realized we were in an enormous well some five yards across and at least fifteen deep, with the spring bubbling up in its center. The bottom of the well was a carpet of fine sand, and its whole interior a dense cloud of white butterflies.

Open-mouthed, I gaped at this miracle in the very heart of the rock. The sun was roasting up above, but down here its heat was tempered by the soft shade of the fig trees that ringed the well, and the swarm of butterflies filled the air with golden light.

“Tired?”

“Yes.”

“Lie down on the sand,” he said. “It’s very clean. Are you thirsty?”

“Yes.”

My brother gave me water to drink from his cupped hands.

“Hot?”

“Yes.”

Antonio started to undress me, piling my carefully folded clothes off to one side, along with my prayer book, rosary, and shoes.

During the few moments this took, my brother's eyes never left me, and his hands skillfully stroked each part of my body as he undressed it. Gradually, I noticed that his caresses had changed character, that his hands were trying to make me aware of what they were doing and of my own body's response. I was in the presence of someone new, a man who up to then had always kept his real desire in check, and was at last going to satisfy it in me.

And I was someone else too, even while staying the same. The very familiar feelings I experienced when my brother touched me were now joined by a fierce power and extreme lassitude. The taste of the body of Christ had hardly left my mouth when my brother's tongue hungrily pushed into it, wiping away the last traces. I was frightened and awed. I was shivering, completely lost in this new encounter. Wasn't my brother ever going to undress, in the filtered sunlight and the swarm of white butterflies? Pressing myself naked against his clothes was driving me out of my mind. But he kept all of his man's secrets hidden, and maybe that was why my flesh was becoming more and more precious to him.

Finally he couldn't control his desire any longer. He pulled down his pants and took me with a thrust of his hips. The butterfly-filled air shook with my cry, and a shower of golden motes rained down on us.

"Go ahead, shout! Shout louder! Don't be afraid!"

My brother was still inside me, his trembling arms squeezing me with all their might, his teeth biting my hair.

It was the longest and the shortest moment of my life. I felt it was truly the day of my first communion, and my brother Antonio had chosen it carefully. I hadn't been out of his thoughts during the two days he had deserted my bed, I now realized. Quite the contrary; his lover's will had been carefully planning my final retreat from the world of other people and my entry into his.

"Did I hurt you?"

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THE CARNIVOROUS LAMB

"Yes ...no...”

"Do you want me to pull out?”

"No! Stay, stay! . . . Yes!” (That joyful, painful cry again, followed again by the golden shower of butterflies.)

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"What?”

"Do you love me?”

"I love you!”

My brother liked those words so much, he repeated them over and over, each time pushing a little deeper into me, appropriating the wild discovery of my body, his shout mingling with mine in my mouth.

I had my first real orgasm in the most beautiful place on earth, and Antonio had chosen it for me. The water from the spring murmured in my ears, and my eyes were lost in a kaleidoscope of butterflies, the whole dominated by my brother’s god-face.

"Do you know you’re my god?”

"I know you’re my god.”

Which of us asked? Which answered? Impossible to say. Each one’s words formed in the other’s mouth; we spoke and heard them from within.

We stayed there for hours. My brother took me three times, and I bravely bore his weight as long as I had to. I loved the merciless pain my brother caused me, bringing me to the edge of delirium. I realized this delirium was a world he had spent years preparing me for, and that he was drawn to it as irresistibly as I was.

When the sun left the butterfly well, Antonio decided we should go back. His pants were flecked with blood; I wasn't able to stand right away. Using spring water, he washed that part of me he "loved the most," saying we had to be careful "it didn't break down." He thought his cynicism hilarious, and started laughing like crazy, as usual.

I looked at him with my most serious face.

"Don't you think so?" he asked.

I didn't answer, and clung to him as he helped me dress. We left the butterfly well and the mine, and headed for home. Held up by my brother's arm, I was walking like an invalid. His eyes clouded over.

"You aren't in pain, are you?"

"No, of course not."

Gradually, my strength returned. Raising my head, I kissed him on the lips. Happiness spread across his face, and he bit me on the nose.

"Are you all right now?"

"Yes, I'm all right. We can do it again whenever you like."

My brother squeezed my neck.

"Tonight."

"O.K."

We reached the house at last light. Starved, Antonio asked Clara if dinner was ready. Mother and don Gonzalo stood looking at us from the wreckage of the hallway after the party. "Did you have a nice walk?" senor my confessor asked.

"Yes, thank you."

"I gave him the landlord's tour. From today on, he’s not a child anymore."

Unconsciously, Mother and the priest both glanced at my brother's fly, which still showed a few suspicious stains. I had no trouble following their thoughts.

A few minutes later Antonio and I sat down to eat; at the end of the meal, we went up to our room. Clara had made up the bed with clean sheets that smelled of quince and two pillows. She had also laid out our pajamas ... for appearance' sake. (Wise Clara.)

CHAPTER

14

S E N OR THE SPECIALIST in lost causes had decided Ï would be ready to take the high school entrance exam in September. I noticed he didn't say I would be ready to pass it, but that was implied. He had gotten to know me, and realized that beneath my apparent indifference lay a voracious curiosity.

So that summer, while my brother furiously studied his enormous physics, chemistry, and math books so as to be ready for engineering school, Mother nearly went crazy readying my "trousseau" for the school year. Her hands were continually in motion dialing phone calls or fingering swatches of cloth, which she scrutinized in the nearly nonexistent light from the parlor windows. She signed receipts and checks constantly, while absent-mindedly playing with a pair of gold-rimmed glasses that made her look like a charming, respectable businesswoman. The glasses were probably a passing fancy; I had never seen them grace Mother's nose before.

Clara thought the whole thing was a bit much. As I was heading for the garden one day, she remarked:

"You'd think you didn't have a thing to wear, poor boy. If you ever get married, we'll have to rent a house just for the preparations."

I stared at her without bothering to answer, and she blushed. We both felt that the reference to an eventual marriage was quite uncalled-for. No need to slip into commonplaces so easily. Besides, I was already married to my brother Antonio. Period. Head high, I went out into the garden to talk with the blackbird.

"Can you believe it? She's losing her grip."

The blackbird started searching for fleas under his wings, and didn’t answer. He’s getting on, I told myself irritably. Some cat could get him any day now, and so long, pal.

A tailor started coming twice a week, measuring and remeasuring me, fitting me with jackets, pants, shirts, and coats. Mother even got it into her head to order me a cape, "for windy days.’’ I really couldn’t see myself wearing something like that, but had to give in. On the day of the cape’s final fitting, I went to the hall mirror: I looked like a canary disguised as a gravedigger. To get back at her, I asked:

"Doesn’t Tonio need anything, for engineering school?’’

"He has his own tailor and shirtmaker,’’ Mother answered proudly. "Also his own taste. Yours, on the other hand, still needs to be shaped.’’

"I’ve never seen him wearing a cape.’’

"It wouldn’t suit him at all. He’s tall and strong enough not to go unnoticed. You’re different; if we didn’t give you some style, you’d be lost in a crowd. It would be awful.’’

There, I recalled Mother’s general confession to Clara: "A young girl, my dear. . .’’ And without knowing why, since there was no reason it should occur to me, I decided that what Mother had really meant was that a decent woman couldn’t go walking around the town, to be whistled at by soldiers or construction workers; it simply wasn’t part of her world. She was taking her own upbringing and applying it to me. Completely in her element, she was looking after every detail of my official debut. That I was a boy, and

not a girl, mattered not at all. There was already one man around her, and that was enough.

Just the same, she suspected that I knew the town pretty well and didn't pass up a little stroll when I felt like it, and that Antonio took me to the movies almost every Sunday evening, and often to the Café Colon terrace for ice cream. But she couldn't have cared less. Those outings weren't her doing. My real coming-out would happen in September, when school started.

Those unofficial trips had helped me understand that the town wasn’t my life. I felt like a stranger there. People said hello to my brother, asked about Father and Mother; at times his friends would sit down at our table, but I excited no curiosity. It was annoying. Antonio went everywhere with me now, his arm draped around my shoulders, and didn't hesitate to kiss me in public whenever he felt like it, even if there were people around. We used to make bets to see how far he would go. One Sunday, just as all of the town’s fashionable people were coming out of one o'clock Mass, my brother pointed out two pigeons billing on the cornice of the church, and, without hurrying, kissed me full on the mouth in front of everyone. Then he very calmly took me by the arm, and we slowly made our way toward the café terrace.

It drove me wild with excitement, and helped me appreciate the outside world more than I had when I was little. I especially enjoyed the fact that it was so perfectly organized that you could spread pandemonium without anyone daring to say a word. Antonio and I were brothers ; everyone knew I had been very sick , and that my older brother had always taken care of me. So what was more natural than the tender love he felt for me, which he couldn’t help showing in public?

From time to time, though, I caught looks that stung me

to the quick. How many times did I see people on the point of contemptuously spitting out the word “fag”? The word should have rotted between their teeth, because they had no right to say it; everything that went on between my brother and me was in the family, and the family is sacred.

I would turn purple, not with shame, but with rage. Furious, I realized that don Gonzalo's speeches about sin hadn't fallen on deaf ears. So I told myself that if I had to be a practicing Catholic to rub other people's noses in my rebellion with impunity, at least I would never allow myself to feel like a Catholic. (I was mistaken; I got trapped against my will while I was in high school. Then, I would even refuse my body to Antonio, who went out of his head with rage and took me by force. But this only happened at times of acute mysticism, and not very often. His spasms of lust on my passive body would fill me with a sad happiness. When you're a real Catholic, you never refuse to live with sin.)

I got used to the town and its flags without ever being able to separate the two. After a while I stopped even noticing them. I turned inward; my own world was made up of something different, I told myself, that must never under any circumstances be contaminated by the world of the others.

Nine o'clock at night, and I wasn't sleepy. Clara had served me dinner out in the garden under the chestnut tree, and within five minutes I was invaded by flies and ants. I started watching them: they were small and blond, like me. I let them do as they pleased, without moving or speaking. Otherwise, Clara would come out with her giant spray gun, and there would be a massacre. It was never much fun when Antonio went out with his friends and I had to eat dinner alone, so I would bolt my meal and scatter crumbs on the

tablecloth and on the ground: it gave me the feeling someone was there, even if they were only insects.

A little earlier, I had seen Clara setting an elegant table for two in the parlor. Did Mother have company? Clara said no. After a lot of questioning, I learned that it was Mother and Father's wedding anniversary. Clara seemed put out; I don't think she was any too pleased with the celebration. Her abrupt answers, she who never confided anything, suggested a kind of sadness. Either she was thinking about Carlos, or was sad because she couldn't be celebrating her own anniversary. Widowed in the war, to me she had

always been a widow: Clara-alone. She was our Clara, but we were never hers.

Feeling neither like studying or sleeping, I finally went upstairs, but came back down right away and went out into the garden. The summer air was too hot; maybe under the chestnut tree I would find a little coolness, blown in from the sea.

Incredibly, Mother had dared to open the parlor's French doors. Or maybe Clara had done it, and Mother hadn't bothered to close them. It was the perfect chance to spy on my parents' anniversary dinner unseen, so I found myself a dark spot under the chestnut tree. A cricket was chirping somewhere among the flowers, a poor substitute for the blackbird, who was asleep at this hour. The spray of the fountain could be clearly heard; normally you only heard it at night, when all was still.

Mother arrived first and lit her everlasting yellow candles. No need to stress the total yellowness of the table: yellow fever was always Mother's imaginary illness. Tonight, it blazed in the topazes Mother was wearing for the occasion. She was very beautiful. Her imprecise hands, fluttering everywhere and nowhere, arranged the little details of the table. She passionately kissed the two red roses Clara had set out. And then it hit me: why red? I would have to ask Clara

later. But the light that suddenly glowed in Mother's face made me forget my surroundings. Christ, she was beautiful! She stroked the chair where Father would certainly sit. And all at once, it came to me: she was waiting for Carlos. By rights, if life for them had been something more or less than what it was, Carlos would be dabbing perfume on his moustache right now and sticking a red carnation in his buttonhole. He would be in front of the mirror, feeling the strength of his legs, ready to bear the weight of Mother's full thighs. By rights. But reality seemed as meaningless as Mother's sudden beauty.

In fact, reality was what arrived: Father. A black suit dressing up his age. No red carnation. And legs that tried not to shuffle but shuffled just the same.

"Good evening, darling.”

"Good evening, my love.”

It was hard to believe they were actually talking to each other that way. Their kiss unraveled in the yellow light, leaving a cottony softness around their mouths. The parlor collapsed in a kind of physical poverty. The wait had been pointless; Carlos hadn’t come.

How could Mother, so achingly beautiful, still show up for this hopeless rendezvous?

"You should have worn a red carnation in your buttonhole, darling. It’s my favorite image of you.”

Father smiled. "When we were young, you thought my red carnation pretty ordinary.”

"Rough, not ordinary; there’s a difference. Why are you so thoughtless?”

"It’s true, I don’t look after myself enough. But then, I’m not what I was.”

"Oh come on, darling! You don’t celebrate an anniversary to look at reality, but to remember. To relive.”

Father smiled again. What had their embraces been like,

back before their speech had lost its color, like some faded flower?

"You know, Matilde, there is one reality I can never forget: you are the most beautiful and the most determined woman in the world. You always were, and always will be. When I was young, and had no trouble loving and analyzing you at the same time, I thought you were the woman to destroy. In the world I wanted to build, there was no place for a woman like you. But then again, I loved you. I told myself I would have to change the world and keep you . . . even in

disguise. An odd contradiction. And I didn't succeed at either. I haven't changed the world, and I haven't kept you."

"Darling . . ."

"You stayed with me. That's different."

The anniversary wasn't getting off to a very cheerful start; it was more like a wake. I wouldn't have been surprised if the dinner had ended with two yellow skeletons sitting in chairs, holding hands with grotesque tenderness.

Clara's appearance cut my thoughts short. She came in carrying two glasses of sherry.

"Good evening, senor."

"Good evening, Clara."

"My dear, I asked you to bring three glasses. I like having you join us in toasting our happiness. You're cruel sometimes, and it makes me sad."

Clara didn't say anything, just went out and returned a few moments later with a third glass of sherry.

"Forgive me, senora. I always forget the things I shouldn't."

"Clara, do you remember when the three of us were children?"

"I remember when the four of us were children."

"Ah, yes ... I remember him too. My horse was always

the best curried and the nicest looking, because he said he liked seeing me on the handsomest horse in the world."

"You were dressed in organdy, always shining. Me, in the kitchen. Carlos in school. And him, in the stables. If it hadn't been for the war, we would surely have stayed in our places."

"Do you regret the war?"

Father asked the question in a voice that seemed to betray the anxiety of someone who both wants and doesn't want to know.

"No. It's just that senora and I stayed in our places. Me in the kitchen, and she . . ."

"I don't shine anymore. I'm dark, now."

"But him . . ."

"... and Carlos . . . Let's drink! Resurrection Day doesn't suit us."

They all drank up. Without a tear. Time freezes everything, even a glance. How did it make Carlos feel, to hear them talking about his death twenty-five years ago? No one asked him.

It was only at the end of the meal that Father and Mother talked about us, their two sons. Vaguely at first, but more clearly as they went along. Father was worried about what he called "a certain worsening in our behavior." (Mother's language; contagious.)

"Don't you think they're a little too close?"

"Darling, what exactly do you mean by 'too close'?"

Father reddened (an absurd reaction, completely out of keeping with Mother's parlor). At last he said brusquely, "I have an idea Tonio is sodomizing the boy."

(Shit!)

"Does that surprise you? He's your son, the spitting image of you."

(Shit!)

"Matilde, you aren’t about to accuse me of. . .”

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"Darling, please don't be ridiculous. If I say he's the spitting image of you, it's because it's true; that's all there is to it." (Father was about to say something, but chose instead to gulp down his wine. Mother, in turn, controlled her voice, which for a moment had almost become completely alien to her parlor.) "I know something about sodomy," she said. "It’s the nature of men.

"It reminds me of when I was sixteen. Do you remember?" (Father thought it best not to answer.) "The boy who used to dog my footsteps from the time I was a little girl, a handsome, husky nineteen-year-old named Carlos, who always put himself between my gaze and the rest of the world, the son of my family's estate manager, and who, as it turned out, would marry me—a decision I made myself—that boy had fire. He didn't want to get me pregnant before we got married, but he had a burning desire to 'express himself in me'—I’m not making a word of this up, that's just what he said—and felt it more strongly every day.

"Carlos, do you remember the first time you sodomized me? You slipped into my room from the balcony, took your pants and underwear off in front of me—not all your clothes, just your pants—so I could see for myself what happened to you when you thought about me. And you said that if I loved you, we had to do something. Otherwise, you threatened to kill yourself. I loved you, so of course I said yes; I didn't want you dead, but alive, like a rearing stallion. Besides, I wanted to as well. I was already a woman, luckily, so I could explain the bloodstains on my virgin sheets the next day. During the years we were engaged, you cost me more blood from behind than you ever did afterwards from in front. And when we did get married, you didn't give up your special love for sodomy for all that. You always used to tell me that you loved hearing my first love-cry again."

As he finished another glass, Father started to smile. "That time, the first time—I remember it as if it were yes-

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terday—you asked me to get undressed completely. I was a bit embarrassed/’

"I know, but I wasn’t about to miss my chance. You have always been the handsomest man in the world. That’s something I’ve never told you.’’

“No.”

They were both lost in a smile from another time, and their hands didn’t need to touch. I wasn’t in the least shocked by Mother’s revelations. What astounded me was her courage in setting the record straight, and the certainty that for all her harping on “smelling sulfur,” at heart Mother wanted us just the way we were, my brother and me.

“So you don’t think we should talk to them?”

“What would we tell them? Spare me the rudeness of answering that what they’re doing is bad. You and I did it for years. And we were happy, because it was nobody’s business but ours. So what would we say to them?”

“Don’t you feel frustrated?”

“No, quite the contrary. Now I understand, even if it seems pretentious to you, that in giving birth to them, I was bringing into the world a hunger for life beyond the margins of normalcy. And you were the one who engendered that fury for life in me. We weren’t able to change the world, and the war you fought only plunged us forever into the absence of hope, which is worse than despair. . . But you and I, we made something different: two unnatural sons, as my friends would say. That’s beautiful. A real achievement, and I’m

proud of it. Are you sorry you won’t have a grandson to rock in your arms?”

His face frozen with surprise, Father stared at Mother, then burst out laughing. Thunderstruck, Mother and her parlor were witnessing the actual resurrection of a man named Carlos. The two red roses, which had been dying of despair a moment before, seemed suddenly to shed a thou-

sand red petals that went swirling about the room like frenzied birds. Stunned, Clara came into the parlor with a bottle of liqueur. But Mother's laugh had already joined Father’s, and, without knowing how or why, Clara started shaking with laughter as well.

I went up to bed to wait for Antonio. Mother frightened me. I no longer saw my love for my brother only as love, but as . . . what, exactly? I have asked myself that question for years, without ever getting an answer.

Now I am asking you: will you bring me the answer, in this beginning of spring?

In September, I was abruptly thrown into a high school class with a hundred boys my age. They were all noisy and relaxed, as if starting high school was something they did every day.

Of course most of them came from primary or preparatory schools, and their characters had been tempered by daily battles with enemies of every stripe: teachers, classmates, and parents, as well as the handymen you always find around those places. I, on the other hand, had shown up like a fly in the ointment. Discreet, polite, and reserved, I embodied the three marvelous qualities that were so often praised by the rotund old lady who taught us French, but that brought me trouble of all kinds at the hands of my classmates and especially my teachers, since they put me within range of their innate tendency toward sadism.

To the yelling, joshing characters I called my schoolmates, I became "The Flower.” To the others, the teachers, with their Mephistophelian smiles and suspicious eyes, I was "The Model Child.” All things considered, I preferred my schoolmates’ sarcasm to the sinister surliness of my teachers, who would call me to the front of the class and point me out to the wild animals as an example to follow,

thereby exposing me to all sorts of unusual dangers. I have never seen anything so shifty as a schoolboy's eyes at times like that.

By dint of stubbornness and contempt, though, I gradually earned everyone’s respect. There wasn’t an ‘‘artistic performance” I didn’t take part in. In the living tableaux, I was usually cast as the annunciating angel—usually bearing bad tidings—or as Good, forever complaining about the attractiveness and power of Evil without ever lifting a finger to change anything. I was unanimously chosen to play the little invalid in "The Post Office,” by Tagore. They stuck a turban with an ostrich feather and a fake emerald on my head, and since nobody knew what a poor, sick Indian boy would wear—the photos we got from the Eastern Mission Center showed only naked, skeletal little Indians searching in the mud between cows’ hooves for a few grains of rice—and putting me on stage naked was out of the question, they wrapped me in a velvet curtain and perched me on an old sofa, while everybody else performed in pajamas. You can hardly imagine how exotic our image of India was: it looked like a costume party at a model prison, with me as a belly dancer thrown in to spice things up.

Whereas Antonio had gone to the old high school, a refurbished former convent that had a beautiful cloister in its center where a few palms grew, a fountain stagnated, and birds would occasionally stray, my "colleagues” and I had the honor of inaugurating the new one, a cement building with the look and regimen of a barracks. The principal cum mathematics teacher was a former Franquist infantry captain, and the janitor-handyman-night watchman was a retired Civil Guard, who had slightly modified his old uniform but apparently

hadn’t had the time to shave off his Prussian moustache. Neither had forgotten his past, and we paid dearly for it. The weekly gym class, for example, was a military training period, and the last math class of the week,

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at one o'clock on Saturday, ended with all of us singing the Falangist hymn "‘Cara al sol" with our right arms raised, and our eyes paranoid under fiercely scowling brows.

When it ended, the principal screamed, “Arriba Espana!”

We all answered, “ Arriba /”

He: “Viva Franco!”

And all of us: “ Viva /”

None of us gave any thought to what we were saying— not even the principal, probably—so it wasn’t any cause for concern. Personally, I’ve never been sincere in wishing a long life to the short fellow I saw during my first walk in town, petrified on his bronze horse. Rituals always wind up becoming meaningless.

My life was pretty hectic, and I didn’t have any time at home anymore. Antonio was studying like a demon and we hardly saw each other outside of bed. Our love suffered, and I turned inward, thinking that bitterness would come someday the way death does: by force of habit. My brother’s sexual needs grew ever more urgent, and drove him to take me in the garden in broad daylight under the jasmine thicket. I wasn’t at all pleased, even when he held me tightly in his arms for a long time, close to tears. But he didn’t look at me.

He started to go through a very painful moral crisis then, and took to wearing pajamas to bed. Instead of cooling his desire, as he hoped, it just made it worse. I myself started visiting confessionals more often than I should have, though never with the same priest. I

enjoyed going from one to another, and gradually managed to let the whole town know about our affair. I picked up plenty of advice, plenty of threats, and plenty of propositions. Each priest wanted me in his booth, and they all enjoined me to be more diligent in my confessions; not to save me from the Devil's temptations, but so that I wouldn't stop talking.

I got to be an expert at confessions, and wouldn't stint with the details I knew priests were especially interested in. I

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was able to give almost all of them hard-ons, and if one didn't succumb the first time, he would see me two or three days in a row, ever more perfumed, ever more a victim of circumstances, and ever more addicted to my unspeakable sin. Finally, the hold-out would lay his trembling hand on my head—I could tell by its tension that the slow erosion was wearing him down—and I would burst out crying on his knees. His legs would part, tight with his desire to pull my face in. At that point I would stop, ask for absolution, and never come back. Outside of the confessional, though, I was still "my son" to them ("my little friend" to the more daring). I was too old to be tempted with candy or dragged off into the bushes, but I got to know the hidden entrances of all the town's churches, and would often wash down a snack of hosts with a glass of communion wine. (A matter of maintaining my little-spoiled-child's whims.)

It was at the high school that I met Galdeano. He had two years, four inches, and thirty pounds on me. He was a regular guy in all the right ways. He studied, but not enough to pass into the next grade. He was good at soccer, but working on his father's little fishing boat kept him from training properly and he wasn't always in top shape, so he wasn't on the school team, which played our longtime, stronger rivals, the Salesians, every year. Above all, he masturbated. He would do it in the toilets, where everybody hid to smoke cigarettes, or in the back rows in class, where he always sat. He would pull out a porno picture, prop it up in front of him, look at it, look at it some more, and start his monkey business. He had a circle of admirers, who spread the word that he came just like a man, and a little more each day.

Galdeano was one of the worst in calling me "Flower," but he wasn't nasty—he just did it for laughs. At first he frightened me. I avoided his eyes and his presence, and told myself that someday I would

have him. During one of his masturbation sessions, he gestured for me to come sit next

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to him. I threw him a cold look, and for some reason he stopped his exhibitionism. But I never approached him. I was never in the toilets, and in class I would always rush for the front rows, but I could feel his eyes glued to the back of my head.

In the third term at school, we were given the chance to cleanse our souls of all their sins with a ten-day meditation retreat. I was surprised to find that the retreat was run by senora my mother's and my confessor, don Gonzalo. I didn't want him to spot me, so I took a seat in the very back of the chapel and found myself next to Galdeano, who always hung out in the last rows.

I tried to draw away, but he grabbed me with all the strength I had suspected he had and forced me down next to him, throwing a leg over mine to keep me from escaping. He didn't smell of cologne, the bastard, but he did smell good—like a young bull in the wind.

"Stay here."

I looked at him without speaking.

"Are you afraid of me?"

No answer. I felt the pressure of his hand getting gentler.

"Is it because I call you 'Flower'? I'm sorry."

"I don't give a damn about that. I just don't like the way you behave, that's all."

"All right, I'll stop. That's a promise."

"I don't see why . . ."

"Hey, do you know how to swim?”

"No.”

"I’ll teach you, if you like. We can go swimming together. Promise?”

"I’ll think about it.”

"All right. I know a place where we can be alone.”

He lifted his leg off mine; I didn’t run away.

Don Gonzalo was already in his chair. His eagle eye swept the assembly like a gust of wind across a wheat field, to see if

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anyone would dare look him in the face. But at that age, our sense of hypocrisy was stronger than our courage. His fury met only humbly lowered heads with eyes staring at the cold stones of the chapel floor.

Suddenly, his voice: "Spaniards!''

I raised my head. I couldn’t believe a religious retreat was going to start with an appeal to nationalism.

"Spaniards, it is our pride to be Catholic. It means that by our own willpower we have set ourselves at the right hand of God Almighty. Listen well: when you set out on a spiritual retreat, you also embark on a meditation on the history of the soul, and the history of the Spanish soul is above all a political one. We have always had God Almighty on our side. In other words, God Almighty is our political leader.”

His fiery eyes searched our faces, trying in vain to find someone who disagreed.

"Most of you come from good families that waged and won our crusade. But there are a few among you who, without being to blame, came out of that heretical tumor which we finally excised from our country's body in 1939. Those are the ones I am speaking to especially. I wouldn't want their youth to be poisoned by their family's defeat. Quite the contrary. The triumph of all Spain—and I mean the true Spain—must be the source of their salvation. The peace we have built by the strength of our hands is for everyone, since we now all find ourselves on the side of truth and justice. Those who refused that peace are already dead, and they died without glory. Forgotten. The Reds are no longer in our memories."

I may have been the only one to look him right in the eye. I thought of Carlos, and realized that this filthy creep's words were digging that much deeper the grave where my dead-but-alive father was rotting. When he said the word "Red," the way you spit out poison, I felt that red was the

only color that I wanted to mark my life. And I told myself that one of these days Mother's yellow and the yellow of the national flags would finally die. (I later found out that the red in the flags represented the blood of their dead, the only ones to deserve a monument.)

So this was the echo of the voice that talked so relentlessly about peace and victory on Father's radio! There was no escaping it.

As the priest's words tried to suck me in during that fucking retreat, I had an urge to do something illicit, something forbidden. I pressed my leg against Galdeano's, and felt his temperature shoot up. A paltry revenge. I would have liked to get him to masturbate in the middle of the peroration, but the big-hearted lug just took me tenderly by the hand. He felt completely excluded from the circle of fire don Gonzalo was drawing around us, whose blinding light was intended to burn our brains and keep us from thinking. I felt like telling him, "You jerk, this concerns you. More than my ass!" But it was pointless; he wasn't interested in anything but me. So I let him feel me up a little.

Still, I was carrying the bitter taste of failure in my mouth. Bit by bit, I set about fanning the flames of Galdeano's desire. One day he nearly raped me in the hallway. I took the chance and pulled him into the chapel, locking the door behind us.

"You want me?"

He literally threw himself on top of me. I shook him off.

"Easy does it!" I said.

I was standing in front of the altar. "I want you to piss there."

He was going out of his mind, but he managed to unbutton his fly, pull out his penis, and start pissing.

"All over."

Shaken and laughing, he obeyed.

"More!"

"I can't. I don't have to anymore!" There wasn't a drop left.

I looked at his penis, limp as a piece of tripe. He was so rattled, he couldn't get a hard-on. "Let's make love, O.K.?" he begged. "Nobody's in the toilets."

"We aren't going to make love, and it won't be in the toilets. We're going to fuck, and right here!"

"Whatever you say."

His voice was hoarse. I knelt in front of him and stroked his manhood with my lips. Right away his penis swelled to its full glory. Above my head, he was panting, his strong fingers caught in my hair.

"Don't come yet!"

“I can’t hold back anymore!”

I roughly pulled away from him. Moaning like an animal, he wrenched me back and bit me on the mouth. “What do you want, you little prick? What do you want?”

“Lift me onto the altar!”

He grabbed me in his arms and threw me onto the altar- cloth.

“Climb up!”

He was on top of me before the words were out of my mouth.

“Undress me. Just half-way!”

His hands yanked my pants down to my ankles. He was shaking all over.

“Take me!”

He rammed into me, and his mouth stifled my shout. He loved my mouth, the bastard. When I felt his orgasm about to explode, 1 squeezed him out of me with a jerk of my hips, and he came all over the altar-cloth. The candelabras, the vases of artificial flowers, and the prayer book all crashed to the ground in the fury of my revenge.

After a few moments, when he got his breath back, Gal-

deano took my face in his hands and looked me straight in the eye:

“Is that what you wanted?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“A Red’s revenge!” And I burst out laughing. “Help me down.”

He stepped down from the altar first and caught me in his arms. He helped me get dressed, combing my hair with lover's fingers.

"Now let's get the hell out of here."

Before leaving the chapel, I turned to him and said, "Thanks."

He held me back for a second. "I didn't do you any harm, did I?"

"You did me good. And I promise I'll make love with you whenever you like."

"Now! In the toilets!"

"No! Not here! Outside! I want to make love with you. This place is only good enough for hate. You can take me to the beach one of these days."

1 omorrow.

"Day after tomorrow, Monday."

"O.K."

We left and went to our math class. It was five to one on a Saturday afternoon. In an hour we would be starting the same old Arriba Espana and Viva Franco ! routine again. But now I could say it with a clear conscience. I had just vaccinated myself against that virus. Arriba Espana! Viva Franco! Slowly, my father was dying. Carlos was dead already.

CHAPTERS

15 & 16

S ummer and winter, in school and out, Antonio was furiously caught up in his studies. To him, I was just the crucible where he burned off whatever energy he didn't expend elsewhere. He stopped playing sports and gave up his calisthenics. It was only thanks to the sweat he bathed my body in every night that he stayed in shape at all.

There was still tenderness, of course, but it was as distracted as the look you give a landscape you know too well. It was as if he weren't seeing me any more, even when he looked right at me. Added to that, the blackbird died without issue. The play of the fountain was now the garden's only voice, but it had never been an element of life to me. The house was dying. All too definite signs pointed to the end of something. I was growing up; maybe that was the death in the air.

I was so busy with my classes and schoolmates, including Galdeano, who already owned my body, that Mother gradually disappeared from my life. Clara was vanishing in a spreading mass of wrinkles, and I couldn't even open Father's study door anymore. A detail: I didn't get a new wardrobe that year. Clara let my pants out a bit and sewed new collars and cuffs on my shirts. She also darned my socks, and

sent my shoes to the shoemaker to be resoled. Food no longer piled up in the storeroom next to the kitchen the way it had before, and Mother's telephone was cut off several times because she hadn’t paid the bill. My brother was trying to finish his studies that year. He had already started asking about jobs.

As for me, I spilled my anxiety on the little deserted beach Galdeano knew so well. Hidden behind the rocks, using his plain clothes as a bed, I offered up my body to his voracity, and could feel myself

disintegrating when he came. There were no intimate bonds between us; we hardly spoke. Still, his need for me made me think that I would always find a little space to live in other people’s orbits. I was beginning to understand what it was to belong to nothingness.

A small wave of unrest swept the students at the end of October, and they took to the streets. I say "they,” because I didn’t get involved. The cause of the demonstration was the brutal repression of a strike by the Asturian miners. There had apparently been deaths, arrests, and firings among the workers, though the newspapers hadn’t carried a word about it. A few of my classmates didn’t come back to school for two weeks, and from their stubborn silence I guessed they had been cured of any urge to talk. The whole thing was odd, because at high school, politics weren’t the order of the day. Most of the kids belonged to the lower middle class— that newly minted saint worshiped by all the current regimes, and which Franquism had engendered here by a kind of spontaneous generation—so they had no reason to criticize the system. Or if they did, it was always in a "constructive” sense, along the lines of "Let’s forget the old offenses”—which was perfectly acceptable.

I was surprised to learn that Galdeano had been among the demonstrators, because I didn’t think he had political leanings. My curiosity was piqued. But we weren’t going to the beach anymore, because of the lousy fall weather, and

had to pull off our little debauches in odd comers, at top speed. You can't talk politics under those circumstances.

Once, I invited him home and brought him up to the room. My intentions were perfectly clear, but I had a twinge of conscience at the last moment, and didn't let myself take him into my bed. It was my brother's bed too, and there were some things I didn't want to spoil. I did get him to take a bath with me, in spite of the almost fanatical respect that he, a poor boy, felt for my rich house. In the bathroom, I saw the marks of his visit to the police station on his body. He admitted that he was sorry he had joined the demonstration, because his father's fishing license had been

suspended for three months as a result; that was tragic, since fishing was their only source of income. He would certainly have to drop out of school and take the June exams as an independent candidate, so as not to lose the year.

"You know, my father insists on my going to the university. I don’t see how I can do it, if things go on like this. He wants me to be a lawyer. But now I understand there isn't any justice here, so why should I waste six or seven years of my life studying that shit? They really beat us up, you know. At the station, I saw a lawyer who was representing one of our classmates. Well, the police just laughed at him."

That word "lawyer" went off in my brain like an alarm. Something to do with my childhood, though I couldn't put my finger on it. Maybe an association with Carlos's past, or with Father and his clients. In any case, I thought I had better put more than just physical abandon into my relationship with Galdeano.

In spite of everything, I didn’t feel concerned by those pseudo-political events. My country didn't belong to me, and I didn't belong to it. A divorce. No point in worrying about each other.

To be honest, it should be said that a certain amount of bitterness was at work there. Some twenty-five years earlier,

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the country had been split between two acrimonious heirs who never gave a thought to the fact that we would be born. And yet we were. So here we were, with a legacy that we rejected with all our might, each in his own way. Which meant we were disinherited, purely and simply.

On Friday, December 9, I came home from school at noon to find the house in an uproar. There were two cars at the door, one of them an ambulance. A few curious bystanders tried to peek into our hallway,

but Clara was standing on the stoop, her eyes vacant, keeping them from sticking their noses into our suddenly violated intimacy.

In a word, Father was ill.

He apparently hadn't been well these last months, but the fainting spell that so alarmed Mother had come over him only that morning at ten. The telephone brought doctors and nurses to the house, as well as an ambulance. Mother had made up her mind to set off on a pilgrimage to consult a specialist somewhere in the world, this time with dying Carlos playing the freak.

My last memory of Father alive was the sight of his pale face and snowy moustache. All that was left of a man who had been so tall and strong that he had to stoop going through doors was a weightless doll, shriveled like an apple forgotten all summer in a cupboard. I had the alarming notion that to fulfill her mission Mother was going to dress him up in my old velvet clothes and throw him into the miraculous waters at Lourdes. What wouldn't she attempt, to bring Carlos back to life? A single nurse was all it took to carry him from Mother’s room out to the ambulance.

Mother seated herself next to Carlos, so that her presence filled Father’s entire field of vision. And she put on a limitless, tireless smile, the most fascinating of all the suns of the universe, a smile I was sure wouldn’t fade for an instant as long as Carlos’s body was alive, dying, or dead for good.

Mother forgot her veils and hats, her coats and dresses, the gloves that spared her hands any contact with life, and left with her hair undone, her hands bare that had forgotten how to caress, caught short by the progress of the disease, without a chance to go to the bathroom to make up a face for herself. Mother was nothing but a smile, but that smile came from the depths of joy, and I felt that Carlos would pass away without ever really feeling the chill of death.

Antonio didn’t witness this desperate flight. No one had thought to warn him that death had just left its calling-card. He only came home

late in the evening to find Clara and me sitting across from one another with nothing in our eyes, nothing in our hands, nothing in our hearts. Empty. With difficulty, we explained to him that "Carlos" (Clara) or "Father" (me) had just started the journey toward his final death, and that we didn't know either its length or the path it would take.

After that, I went into Father's study and turned off the radio, which was still talking about peace and victory. The audience had left. The show was over.

So now there were the three of us, Clara, Antonio, and me, haunting a house that wasn't the same anymore. Now we could open and close all the doors, if we felt like it, use all the rooms, stop lowering our voices or stifling our laughter because of Mother's naps or Father's clients, take down all the rugs blocking the windows to the street and open them, and sit at our ease having a cup of coffee after dinner and playing canasta while we greeted the passersby. But we didn't do any of those things. Without Mother's anxious presence, and now the anxious presence of Father's absence, the house was no longer itself. It would take us years, centuries, to make a new life there that wouldn't be tainted by their memory. It would be out of the question, for example, to put any record other than one of those old Chopin num-

bers Mother liked so much on the record player: it would have stopped dead and broken down forever.

There was nothing to be done. Frightened by the emptiness their departure had left, we retreated to our rooms and the kitchen. Clara didn't sleep with us, because she didn't want to witness what she called "certain sights." but the three of us ate together, huddled by her stove. (I learned afterward that she had worked wonders with what little money Mother had left her, spent her own savings, and even gone so far as to buy on credit.)

And we waited. For a letter, a telegram, a phone call, we didn't know anymore. News, anyway, in whatever form.

But Father and Mother seemed to have been swallowed by shifting sands of silence. The mailman left only catalogs and bills in the letter-box, all in Mother's name. Antonio opened the envelopes, and started to worry at the bills' total. The most recent marriages and birthdays among the large invisible coterie had cost a fortune in presents, and nothing had been paid for. Moreover, Clara told us that Mother had ruined herself buying the drugs Father had been taking to dull his pain all these last months, which some guy smuggled in from Tangiers. I thought it was all a bit overdone, but so what?

One day a letter came, two months after their exodus. It had been mailed in Stockholm, Sweden.

My dears ,

It is frightfully cold , but perfect for Carlos s health.

It is lucky I learned some French when I was little; I dont know how I would manage , otherwise.

Don't worry too much about the unpaid bills. Send everything to my estate manager; I have given him all the necessary instructions. To balance our budget , it seems to me you ought to spend the summer at the

country house. Vm not forcing you, of course. You can decide for yourselves. But if you go, Clara will know what to do. And it will give you more than three months' rest.

Do one thing for me: if my confessor calls, just tell him I no longer need his services. I have finally come to understand that the only god I ever needed is in front of me, and he is dying. I repeat: no more need for religion. In a way, that will also save us money. I paid too much for the altar that was installed in my name and at my expense in the Christo Rey church in don Gon- zalo's parish.

Oh, before I forget. Last night, your father spoke for the first time since we left the house. He asked me to tell you that he loves you,

and Clara too. He loves me too, but I knew that already, and I didn't let him finish his sentence. I am worried about his health.

I carefully chose the stamp I am putting on the envelope, in case you feel like starting a collection. I don't know if we are going to stay in Sweden very long. I have learned that cancer research is much more advanced in Germany, and. even more so in the United States and Russia. But I'll keep you posted, whatever I decide.

Take care of yourselves, and take special care of Clara.

Yours, Matilde

I couldn't contain my fury after reading the letter. “Who is this 'Matilde'?" I screamed.

Antonio and Clara looked at me absently; it didn't occur to them to answer.

“So it's cancer," said my brother.

Clara started shaking all over. Her feet, legs, hands, arms,

lips, her entire body shook in a crescendo, like a machine suddenly gone berserk. A simple machine you had seen running all your life without ever knowing its secret workings. I was afraid she was going to explode right there in the kitchen and blow everything to bits with her: the house, the town, the whole country, life itself.

Fascinated, unable to move, I watched her despair, born at the heart of some unsuspected anguish. Faced with a fact that couldn’t be changed, I felt overcome with inertia. It was Antonio who took her in his arms, hugged her tight, and said, “Stop, stop! We need you!”

And Clara calmed down all at once, the way you snap on a light switch.

We needed her, so she reverted to her status as a non-person. Clara the Sacrifice.

Mother’s pilgrimage with her dying god Carlos proceeded from county to country, from clinic to clinic, from drug to drug. My brother was on the verge of finishing his studies, and our relationship was falling apart. His excitement and physical need hadn’t diminished, but he felt it was indecent to do anything as long as Father was dying, somewhere out in the world. He was going through a moral crisis that didn’t have anything to do with him—or so I felt—and when I came on to him too much, he would jump out of bed and sleep on the floor. One night, I announced that I was leaving his room and moving into Mother’s.

“Damn it, that’s not the point!” he shouted. “Don’t you understand that for me it’s pleasure , and that I can’t indulge myself while Father is dying?”

“For me, it’s love,” I answered dryly. “I haven’t had a father or a mother. So I don’t see why 1 should deprive myself.”

I put on my old bathrobe and went downstairs to the

hallway. At a loss, I went into Mother's parlor and stretched out on her sofa. My brother came looking for me a little later, and took me on the sofa's worn velvet without a word. An impartial observer wouldn't have thought sex was very beautiful, the way we behaved: Antonio acted like a pig that enjoyed wallowing in its own filth, and dragged me down with him. In the inglorious silence that followed, we went back upstairs to our room and slept together as usual, but his skin was cold. I awoke with circles under my eyes, and wasn't too pleased when the mirror showed me the sparse new hairs that were starting to grow on my lip and chin. I went off to school with my thoughts elsewhere. (That was the day I felt the very first elements of our final parting starting to take shape.)

I decided to carve out a more secure place for myself in the narrow world of Galdeano's life. My own universe was clearly getting poorer.

Mother's second letter came from Switzerland, mailed two months before, whereas we had already learned from her estate manager

that they were now in Moscow. Among other things that didn't have anything to do with Father's condition, she wrote of "this frightful greenery, where nature is so perfectly disciplined that you are tempted to think of death as the only escape from so much boredom. I have finally grasped here what my confessor meant when he used to go on about this Vale of tears.' When you organize the world, life becomes unbearable." Not a word about Father. I was sure she wanted to cheat us of his death, just as circumstances had cheated us of his life.

All in all, it was probably for the best. I didn't feel deeply moved, but Antonio went about in a state of perpetual sadness, and I was sure Clara was crying at night, from the looks of her red, swollen eyes. Me, I didn't give a damn. Father was finally coming into his own on a monstrous grand tour organized by Mother, the lover of cataclysms.

That letter was also signed "Matilde." No doubt about it; Mother was disassociating us from the living corpse she was hauling around by ambulance from country to country, clinic to clinic, drug to drug.

I was cheating on my brother with Galdeano, and cheating on Galdeano with other friends who were always inviting me to go swimming. In spite of Galdeano's lessons, I never did learn to swim very well. To me, the beach was just a huge bed where I dirtied my body with sand, sperm, and saliva. Yet nothing gave me the release I needed in order to pay proper attention to my classes. I failed my exams in June, and Antonio nearly went berserk; I was afraid he was going to hit me. (I was sure he suspected that I had other lovers. In his eyes, our parents' absence didn't excuse my failing. He knew I didn't love them.)

We finally did uncover the parlor windows facing the street, but not because we wanted to let the light in; a man came and took away the large medieval tapestry that had been covering them. He brought us a letter from the estate manager, explaining that circumstances had forced Mother to sell this collector's item. The parlor had always been so dark that I'd never had a chance to appreciate the "collector's item," so I didn't feel any great loss. Too bad.

It was a period of deterioration, a long series of months that stretched endlessly on and on. We were living outside of life, hostages to Mother's infrequent letters, in which she shared only passing impressions. They revealed neither the length of her trip nor the state of Father's health. We were completely sunk in vagueness.

One morning, to get back the old feeling of being a normal person, I went through the pockets of my brother's Sunday suit. (The suit was two years old already, and it showed: it was losing its shape, and Clara's damp brush couldn't hide the shine at the elbows. It reminded me of that poor guy, Father's client, whom I had let in the day of

my total aloneness. Was Antonio going to wind up like that?)

In one of his pockets, I found a photograph of a girl whose face I didn't recognize; she'd had the nerve to inscribe it with "To Antonio, so he will always think of me," with a scrawled signature. I can't say how shocked I was. I propped it up in an obvious place on our night table, and went upstairs several times to look at it, gradually convincing myself that she was incredibly ugly. I wept with rage.

That evening, our depressing dinner in the kitchen, during which none of us said a word, felt endless. Clara got up and cleared the table. I got up too, said goodnight, and went out, followed by my brother. Out of habit, he took me by the shoulders. I shook him off.

"Something wrong?"

I didn't answer. I went into the room, with Antonio at my heels.

"What about this?"

My brother looked at the photo, and said, "What about it?"

"It was in your pocket."

"She's a friend."

"Who wants you to always think of her."

"You aren't going to make a scene over something so stupid, are you?"

"Here, you'll see what I'm going to do!" And I tore the picture to pieces.

I thought there was going to be hell to pay then and there, but my brother simply burst out laughing, grabbed me by the waist, and threw me on the bed with him on top, just like in the good old days.

"You're jealous, aren't you?"

"Shit!"

"That means you still love me!"

"Go fuck yourself!"

My brother covered my mouth with his, and I wasn't able to say a word. In any case, everything got straightened out.

Next morning, I woke up completely cured of my desire for anyone else. No one, not Galdeano, not any of the others, could compare with my brother Antonio in bed. That was his domain, and so was my body, where he expressed all his masculinity to perfection.

(To dispel the anxiety I feel at your being late—maybe because of the same memories that are washing over me—I am trying to detail the events of those days by recreating the house's emptiness and my pointless life outside of it. Without Mother there, all of our psychological mechanisms were rusting from lack of use. Without hate, what good was our love?

Clara stopped being Clara, and became the little maid, she cleaned and cleaned so all day long, cooking vegetables for ten, as if our imminent bankruptcy gave her a crazy desire to feed us forever. And

I was starting to understand that your love couldn’t fill the void of Mother’s enmity.) Mother wrote again:

One can say what one likes about death, but I now understand that it is above all a physical need, like hunger or thirst. Watching it at work, my eyes fill with the most beautiful sight I have ever seen. Death is a deep, silent monologue whose echoes constantly remind me of the existence of another language. It isn’t enough to love what is dying; you have to believe in it.

And it’s so real! In Carlos’s nearly dead body, I can see another life growing little by little each day, fed by a feverish will to live: death’s own life. The doctors call it cancer, but ‘ death’ is such a beautiful name, I don’t see why we should look for pseudonyms.

Every morning, death wakes up definitely more alive than it was the night before. It only pretends to go to

sleep when Carlos says his daily "Good morningA But it isn’t sleeping; I can see it taking a beauty bath deep in those dying eyes. And when it realizes that I’m not there to block its path , it starts to sing and dance. It only turns nasty with the doctors and nurses. It suddenly makes Carlos’s cough worse , and strews the sheets with hairs that look like flotsam fallen from that handsome ship his head used to be. Or else it takes the fever away from his rectum all at once and puts so much color in his cheeks that it takes me back twenty- five years. But it only does this with the specialized personnel , even if I’m concerned. With me , death is always straightforward , maybe because it knows I have a certain interest in seeing its life grow.

Death , Carlos , and I will leave for Washington tomorrow morning.

Yours , Matilde

Though the letter revealed a deliberate break between her feelings and Carlos's life, Mother hadn’t made me feel death’s despair.

"When you come right down to it," said Clara, "she's right; it is something else." (Ancient Clara.)

Antonio had just iSnished his studies, with wonderful grades. We didn't celebrate, but he announced over dinner in the kitchen that he would be leaving for Venezuela the following month; he had accepted a job in a chemical factory there. Not very glorious. It all sounded so false, seemed so down-to-earth, I had an upset stomach that night.

To get the money for Antonio's plane ticket, we went to see Mother's estate manager, whose curt manner told us that things were going from bad to worse. Clara and I decided not to go to Madrid with my brother, so as not to make our financial situation worse; Antonio would be taking the plane alone.

Our last farewell went off along lines that had been laid out well in advance for that kind of parting.

"Will you come back?"

"Yes, Ill come back."

Silence. No tears.

"Do you still love me?"

"Yes, I love you."

Silence. Not a gesture, not a caress.

"It's a good job, isn't it?"

"Excellent."

We said the same things, night after night.

Of the last night, I remember only his restlessness. And my despair.

I went out to the hall to get clean towels from my linen closet, and found Clara sitting at the top of the stairs.

"What are you doing there?”

"I'm guarding you.”

(Clara the Dog.)

I felt like crying, like blowing everything up, but I kept quiet. The dawn light was already draining the house of its color, and it gave Clara a dirty look I had never seen before, like makeup smudged with tears. An erasure.

My brother's suitcases were downstairs in the hallway.

One by one, I broke off with all my school friends. I had just turned down a part in the year-end play, which was to be performed at one of the town theaters, and I gave up almost all my escapades at the beach. I no longer wasted my time hanging out with Galdeano or anyone else in the shady nooks of the beautiful harbor gardens, but came straight home after classes. Not in order to immerse myself in memories of Antonio and experience his distance, but in order not to leave Clara all alone in a house haunted by so much absence.

Whitish squares started to appear on the walls where paintings or carpets had hung, as they were bought and removed by the estate manager’s customers. The silverware, too, disappeared from the parlor’s elegant French cupboards. Of the lot, Clara kept only Mother’s little bell.

"So you’ve taken to stealing?”

"It isn’t stealing, honey. Senora your mother may still need me. She never did like to shout.”

It was certainly the first time I ever heard Clara say "senora your mother” without bitterness.

I tried to spend as much time as I could with her, chatting about anything at all, but she spoke less and less, and her obstinate silence drove me to remember Antonio, which was exactly what I wanted to avoid at any cost. There was no way I could sleep in our bed; "our" room had become a sounding-box that relentlessly echoed the obsessive memory of my brother's voice. After a week of insomnia, I decided to move into the parlor.

"I want to be near you," I said, answering Clara's questioning look.

But it didn't work. She went on looking at me, on the point of saying, "I understand your unhappiness, honey." That sort of thing, I didn't want to hear. I turned my back on her.

(A few days before getting Mother's last letter, I remember having an impulse to burn down the house. But that wouldn't solve anything, I told myself right away, and I might regret it later on. In short, I lost my nerve.)

My dears ,

My husband died at exactly six this morning , in other words just at the time when everything comes to life. I didn't have the happiness of receiving his last smile or his last look , because there wasn't any; he had been in a coma for three days. Death betrayed me,

cruelly cheating me of all the beauty of its unfolding. And yet I had already started to love it. But death may not have wanted to belie its reputation vis-d-vis the others (meaning the specialized personnel), and behaved toward me like the rudest of guests: no compliments and no goodbyes, after we had taken tea together.

So here we are. My husband is just a corpse now, in search of earth or fire to return to nothingness. He is rushing toward decay, and I had to ask the nurse for an atomizer to spray the room, so as not to burden my legitimate pain with the nausea I could feel coming over me.

We are leaving for New York tonight, where I have already made an appointment with a well-known, very expensive embalmer. He is very, very expensive, but after all, I want him to put some order in this piece of refuse. After that, we will return together to the country house at the end of the month. This isn't a whim; I have been forced to sell the house in town. It no longer belongs to us. So I have to ask you not to spend too much time moving. Take whatever you like, but remember that the country house has everything we need. As for me, I would only ask you not to forget my desk, the little lambskin my mother gave me, and', especially, the statue of the rearing horse from my dead husbands desk. The day I first saw Carlos naked in front of me—I was still a young girl—the image of a rearing horse came to me. And I had that image of life sculpted.

Yours, Matilde

P S. I feel it is my duty to stop off in Venezuela to bid Antonio our final farewell If I arrive later than expected, you needn't fear the worst.

)

P.P.S. (To Clara) My dear , when you get to the country house , remember particularly to water my yellow rosebush properly. The peasants have let everything run down these last years . . . certainly because of my poor management. M.

I took an irrational pleasure in completely tearing the house apart. I turned everything topsy-turvy, climbing the stairs hundreds of times a day, whenever I suspected that my hatred might have overlooked some corner, upstairs or down. I found a little money and a couple of jewels Mother had lost one day, and gave them to Clara like a treasure I had wrested from the bottom of the sea. Only Father’s study escaped the feverish ransacking; Clara was keeping the key hidden somewhere deep in her underclothes.

Clara watched me in silence, without ever saying a word to show her fatigue or blame me. She must have felt that the violence with which

I attacked this fortress abandoned by the enemy was necessary for my mental health and my future, assuming I had one. But every fifteen minutes or so she would come with a towel soaked in vinegar to wipe off my forehead. When she saw that I had calmed down, she said:

"You remind me of a dog who has always loved his leash, but one day, when his master is away, for some reason tears it to pieces."

" Tor some reason,' you say? You're the one talking about leashes and masters. . . ."

"And about love. That's what life is all about. Listen, it isn't that I don't see things your way, believe me. But at least you've had that. Go knock on other people's doors if you want to know the truth."

God, what sadness! I even found a whole nest of worms in a crack in the trunk of the old chestnut tree. I ignored the symbolism, but found myself thinking that the old tree had been in perfect shape only yesterday.

"There's just one thing I want to ask of you/' said Clara. "Go easy on your father's study."

"Don't worry. It's over, now.

"All right then."

She rummaged in the depths of her clothes, brought out a key, and unlocked the study door. We both hesitated before going in.

"I put a crate aside to pack the horse in," I said.

"Promise you'll wrap it really well, won't you? I'm afraid it'll break during the trip. You know these moving guys, and the trucks, and the road ..."

"Relax, relax."

"As for the rest..."

"Do you have any idea about what we ought to do?"

"I think we should burn all your father's papers and take his books to the country house. You may need them someday, you or your brother."

"Yeah. Maybe to learn Father's story at last."

"Please, don't be sarcastic. Not where your father is concerned, anyway. It hurts me."

I kissed her without saying anything.

Clara made a pile of the papers we found in the study, and I inventoried all the books. I didn't find anything that could give me the key to my father's life, but I was struck by a tiny book of poems, in which two verses were marked by a scrap of paper and a red pencil line:

Traveler , there is no way.

You make your way by walking.

If my father had lived his life by those verses, he must have suffered terribly on the day he stopped walking forever, in this sinister cell of a study.

I devoured the little book, which became my constant companion. (When I am walking, and I stop, I always think

of my favorite poet and the deep rebellion in those words. You make your way by walking; no one else can do it for you. You can't take a path someone else has made. And yet I had always walked along your path. What a fool I was, to think you'd always be there to clear the way. Shit!)

After dinner on the last evening, we sat down on the kitchen steps and Clara set fire to Father's papers, which were piled out in the garden. Gently, the flames consumed the contents of a story I would probably never know. Transfigured by the light from the bonfire, Clara suddenly turned to me and said:

"Your father's name was Carlos. Neither your father nor Carlos had a story. Worse, Carlos's story stopped when your father's non-story began.

"We were about the same age, the four of us, and everything we were told not to do, we did together. We four always met in what was forbidden. Our worlds were completely different, of course; opposite, but not completely separate. My world was the kitchen, from which my mother ran your grandmother's house. Juan's world—my dead husband's—was the stables, where his father took care of your grandfather's animals. Carlos's world was a little of everything, inside and out; his father—your family's former estate manager—looked after your grandparents' workers, their land, and their income. Matilde's world, when she was a little girl, was the parlor, always full of private tutors. Lace curtains separated her world from ours, but the barrier might as well have been steel. She and I touched the same flowers every day, for example: me very early in the morning, when I watered the garden, and she right afterward, wearing a straw hat with ribbons, the sweet taste of cocoa still in her mouth, when my presence no longer upset the garden's harmony, and the flowers put out their perfume to welcome the pretty senorita.

"But there were certain places where nobody would have

suspected our forbidden presence: along the river, at siesta time, or on certain terraces, at night. That’s where our fourway love began. A love we had to arrange, later on. I say arrange, because both of the boys loved Matilde, which was natural, and I loved both of them, which was crazy. Still, I think that was the only time in my life when I had dreams. Anyway, Matilde loved only Carlos. You know, the first time she laid eyes on him, Carlos’s image filled her sight. . .

“Carlos was the only one of the four of us to go to high school. He wasn’t working in the household, and his father wanted him to study law, and be a lawyer. For years, we only saw him during vacations. But you know how long our vacations are; there was no danger of our forgetting him. And he had a power and a special authority over us. He even managed to get Matilde and me to study trigonometry, in our little spot by the river. You never knew that, did you? But not Juan. He wasn’t born to bathe in the light of culture, as Matilde used to say. The arguments went on forever. Crazy with rage, Carlos would threaten to drown him in the river. Matilde and I just giggled, because the river was almost always dry. So Juan would go back to his books, but it was hopeless. All he knew was how to take care of animals, but there, he was something else! The horse little Matilde learned to ride on always had the glossiest coat . . .

“Carlos, now, was all love! He was the one who got us interested in political events. At the university he got mixed up in politics right away. He even gave speeches, which he would repeat for us, to indoctrinate us. He didn’t need to; our love followed him. But then the war broke out. 1936. And the pair of them, two young men of twenty-two and twenty-three, took up their rifles—and not just to go rabbithunting.

“The first year of the war, on December 4, Juan and I got married. Senora Matilde’s mother and senor Carlos’s father stood up for us, and senorita Matilde and don Carlos were

our witnesses. But there was already a big difference between the two men, and between all of us, for that matter. Carlos was wearing the handsome uniform of a Commissioner of Culture; Juan was just a private with a twenty- four-hour pass to get married.

"Ten months later, my soldier husband Juan was dead. On the Teruel front. His skeleton must be rotting somewhere under the wheat there. We were never able to locate exactly the common grave, in spite of all the money your mother spent trying. Too bad. I like to imagine him lying under a wheat field. Poppies are the reddest flower there is, and wheat fields are where they grow.

"Anyway, we lost the war, as you know. Matilde didn't, but we three did, the living and the dead. It concerned your mother only insofar as it affected her love for Carlos, which I must say was enormous. He had been taken prisoner, but thanks to all of senorita Matilde's parents' money, he got out of prison in two months' time. Money is a very powerful argument, sometimes. There was talk of their getting married, and Matilde swore that if it didn't happen, she would throw herself among the wild bulls. I can understand her. By then, she had already been in Carlos's arms, and nobody was going to cheat her of that place of honor.

"So they were married, and Carlos returned to the university. And that's where his story ends. He finished up, of course, but after his first couple of attempts to get a decent job came to nothing, he realized that as a 'Red,' he would never be allowed to make a name for himself. In any case, what laws can you plead under a regime that doesn't have any? That was some consolation, but it was true, too: the new regime was consolidating its power completely outside of any laws or justice. Around the parlor table, we used to talk about that practically every day. . . .

"Your brother Antonio was born in 1943, and his was the mouth that first shaped the word 'papa.' Carlos was buried

for good then, and 'papa/ sinking a little further into his study every day, started to see poor people, who came for advice on small matters of money, or inheritance, or business. 'The little lawyer for the poor/ your mother would joke, until sadness overcame us for good. We stopped laughing, the three of us, and fell silent. Forever."

Of the enormous pile of Father's papers, only ashes remained. Clara sat silently watching the smoke rise into the branches of the old chestnut tree. I got up, went into the study, and brought Father's radio out to Clara in the garden.

"What do we do with this?"

"Whatever you like. If it were alive, I'd take a butcher knife and slit its throat. That radio killed your father; that radio and its voice."

I threw the old radio onto the smoking ashes, and flames soon flared up to attack it. It didn't take more than ten minutes. All that remained were little pieces of metal, a few screws and wires.

"Everything dies together," Clara said. "The disease and its causes. It's good, that way."

We were silent. Then, after a while:

"Did I ever tell you that your mother is beautiful? Me, I'm ugly. Maybe that's why the two of us have been unhappy."

"Clara, you're beautiful too. Wherever you look, truth shows itself in all its beauty. Can you think of anything more beautiful than truth?"

"You know, honey, I've always needed truth to keep me from being a nobody. And if you think truth is beauty, well then, let's say I'm beautiful."

And she smiled. What a smile, what a smile, what a smile!

We met the new owners of the town house the next morning. Fat, rich Senor and Senora So-and-so. I just

couldn't imagine them in Matilde's and Carlos's places. But it didn't matter to me anymore. When we left the house for good, Clara took a piece of chalk—a memory from my childhood—and drew a cross on the front door.

"Why did you do that?"

"So that if we ever remember this house, we'll think of it as a cemetery. And we won't feel sad at having left it for good."

(Clara the Witch.)

CHAPTER

17

C LARA AND I moved into the country house. That is, we moved our ghosts into a house that was itself the ghost of the house in town. We unpacked the crates containing Mother’s desk, Carlos’s horse, the little carnivorous lambskin, the books no one knew anything about or was likely ever to read, our clothes, and the entire kitchen, which Clara had insisted we take. The new owners would inherit only the white walls, scrubbed by twenty years of Clara the Clean’s labor. I hadn’t even finished school, and Clara said it was too bad, though I didn’t see why.

We were still in the dark as to our present financial situation, but in the country the feeling of being bankrupt wasn’t as strong as it had been in town. Besides, there was no need for ties, suits, shirts, or shoes. Jeans, T-shirts, and sandals did the trick.

This time, I examined Mother’s rosebush at length. It was huge, tenaciously climbing along the French doors of the parlor—the twin of the one where nightmare-Mother was replicated—and was affected by a strange disease: it had more yellow roses than green leaves. It looked almost naked, infested with boils ready to burst. Clara watered it religiously every day at dawn. That annoyed me; it was high time she got a little rest.

"You don't need to get up at five in the morning to water that fucking rosebush!"

"It's at dawn that plants are rested enough to take some nourishment, you know. That way, they can face the day's little cares without worrying: wind, sun, rain, insects, birds . .

"All right, all right."

"I want it to be beautiful when Matilde returns."

"It won't ever be beautiful. It can't. Those yellow roses look sick. They're ugly."

"What is beauty, honey? Maybe it's ugliness!"

Goddamned Clara!

I didn't dare take a walk around "our property," since I didn't even know if it still belonged to us. The experience with the town house and the veil Mother had drawn over the state of our finances were enough to make me cautious. I didn't want to have some new owner or tenant throwing stones at me, thinking I was a thief. Besides, I saw hardly anyone around the house. Nobody came by to welcome us; something must have happened. Anyway, whatever the situation was, I didn't give a damn. I wasn't about to ask Clara if she knew why people were avoiding us. I just didn't give a damn.

We weren't alone very long, Clara and I. On the last day of June, a hearse whitened by the dusty road stopped in the shade of the old chestnut tree in front of the house. (A detail worth remembering: one day, I had noticed that this tree's trunk had the same crack and the same nest of worms as its twin in the town house garden. That doesn't help matters, I told myself.) The driver, a strong, skinny guy (as far as I could tell from the back) wearing a black uniform spangled with silver piping, honked the horn. It struck me as the most sinister sound I had ever heard; I was sure its melody had been composed with yellow Chopin's yellowest notes.

Clara and I came out and went over to our cheerful visitors. The assistant driver, likewise dressed in a black uniform spangled with silver, was already busily wiping off the car’s dust. Through the windows decorated with wreaths we caught sight of Mother sitting next to a coffin. In profile, she looked like a Greek cameo, her gaze as limpid and staring as a doll’s. Before I had time to feel any emotion whatever, the storybook driver opened the double doors,

and Mother’s voice reached us like the chill whistle that rises from a cellar when you lift the trapdoor.

"Get in. We’re going to the family cemetery to bury my husband.”

Silently, Clara and I climbed into the car and sat down on one of the side benches. Mother was on the other. Between us lay the heavy, lined mahogany coffin, with a meticulously painted portrait of Young Carlos on its glass cover. I looked at Mother, trying to figure out what was going on, but her staring eyes and perfectly composed face gave the impression that she was forever frozen in emptiness. And that nothing and no one could ever reach her.

The mortuary car started up, taking the same road as the day of my first communion. This time, though, no one had swept the thick dust from our path; nothing but bits of sun- dried grass blown by the wind made up our procession. Only the crows had come back, settling on the stone walls for a moment to throw us a hungry look before flying off toward the hill with the snakes.

We all got out at the small cemetery. Someone had already dug a grave, but judging from the color and moistness of the dirt piled on either side, it hadn’t been done recently.

"I had the grave dug last month,” Mother said, "and ordered the tombstone.”

A huge marble slab was lying on the ground, inscribed with Carlos’s name, the dates of his birth and death, and the words: Died of chronic death.

Stricken by that sinister wisdom, I silently tried to catch Mother’s eye. Guessing my thoughts, she said:

"We called his illness cancer, so as to be able to discuss it, diagnose and treat it. But his disease was death. Chronic death.”

"In other words, victory and peace," added Clara. "Didn't you understand, darling?"

"You're right, my dear. That's what I call chronic death, and not just to be poetic. It's an accurate statement."

"Yes, Matilde."

Mother looked at her for a moment, and suffering old as a wrinkle and sudden as lightning showed on her face, as if she wanted to escape her prison of elegance once and for all. But it disappeared as quickly as it had come, before turning into tears or even a hint of tears.

The black, spangled driver and his black, spangled assistant took out the coffin. They looked as if they were carrying an empty container, which gave a misleading appearance to a heavy reality. The effort didn't bring sweat to their brows for a second. An empty coffin. Empty Carlos. A perfect job by the New York embalmers. Carlos the feather.

"I would like you to say goodbye to him now. His son Antonio has already done so at the Caracas airport. As I am sure I said in my last letter, it was my duty to bring him to his son ... to ease a little of the pain of this trip. Tonio cried. I am sure he loved him. But I beg you, don't take either his gesture or my words as an invitation to do the same. We are all real, now. All four of us. No need to go beyond that."

The black, spangled driver raised the coffin lid, on which Young Carlos's painted image was as frighteningly serene as an elegant restaurant window. Inside was a tiny replica of Carlos himself. I looked in vain for the little key showing the scale of the model, but there was no indication of his original size. Carlos had simply shrunk, either from his chronic-

death-illness, or from the embalmer's work. He looked like a child, aged overnight by a bad dream or disguised as a little old man with

white hair and a moustache. An absurd coral carnation pinned to his tailor-made suit made the doll- corpse look like a little jeweled religious statuette. With a hat adorned with tiny doves and ribbons on his noble, scaled-down head, he could have led a procession.

Infinitesimal Carlos. He would probably stay that way until eternity's non-arrival. Deprived forever of the fatigue of waiting, his blood lost forever down the drains of the New York embalmer's laboratory. Looking at him, it struck me that I had nonetheless been engendered as a direct consequence of an orgasm by that. It wasn't anything to be proud of. The word "Father" rotted in my mouth.

For a long moment, Clara ran her fingers along the profile of this man she had deeply loved, the imprecise gesture of someone trying to restore the vanished grace to a drawing in the sand. Then she let out a moan so hoarse that I thought it was coming out of the ground.

Mother took Father's head in her hands and kissed him on the lips. "There is still something of his last kiss left," she said. "When he gave it to me, I thought of Clara. At times one has some awareness of one's duty. Perhaps too late."

I didn't allow myself the slightest gesture. I didn't feel like kissing or touching the souvenir doll, or joining the melodrama. It was enough of a circus already. I wanted to see the shovels get to work, and hear dirt falling on the expensive woodwork and the painted shatterproof glass.

Mother must have sensed my haste. She made a slight sign to the spangled driver, who was standing with his assistant a little apart from the family circle. They looked as if they belonged to another world, and were only here by an unfortunate error in reincarnation. The two men finally started their gravedigging. Covered with dust and blinded by the wind, the three of us heroically lasted the long quar-

ter of an hour it took for Carlos to disappear completely. In the future, the marble tombstone would be the only witness to his anonymous

passage through the world. And when they read its inscription, maybe people wouldn't think odd the only definition of my father's life: chronic death.

Mother didn't fill us in on our financial situation right away, but I could smell catastrophe in the air. She was writing too many letters to her estate manager and was getting too many from everywhere else, all bills. She would glance at them and immediately file them away in her black desk. The Carlos-lover fancy had obviously cost Mother her entire fortune.

One day, I heard Mother and Clara talking a little louder than usual. They were sunk in the dark depths of the parlor, but had forgotten to close the door. I listened in.

It was just a matter of firing Clara, on the grounds that we didn't have enough money to pay, feed, or clothe her. Mother laid out the whole matter in her elegant, pathetic style. But Clara wasn't going for it. She said that if there was food for two, there was enough for three; no question about it. And that she had enough dresses and aprons to last until her dying day. (Barefoot Clara didn't mention shoes.) In any case, she said, worrying about her was out of the question. It was more pressing to think about me and Mother. Conclusion:

"I will leave this house the day you die, senora. Not before."

"Clara, I beg of you, don't call me senora anymore. When I hear that from you, I feel terribly artificial. And it depresses me. Don't you remember Matilde the little girl anymore? Since you insist on our staying together, let's return to our childhood, shall we?"

"All right, if you like. But no more talk of sending me away."

Coming out of the darkness, Clara headed for the light of her kitchen, her eyes full of tears.

From then on, Mother started to resurrect a little more each day, with a gaiety I had never seen in her before. She never failed to surprise

me.

Antonio's letter announcing his marriage reached us early on a drizzle-darkened afternoon in November, the month of the dead. Mother was singing, getting ready to take one of her little walks in the neighborhood of the chronic-death tomb. She went there every day, looking as impatient as a young girl on her way to a secret rendezvous. She would hide behind tree trunks, take a detour around the chapel, or hesitate when she came to the tomb, as if she were looking for the exact place where he was waiting for her. She would even consult little pieces of paper that she pulled from her cuffs or the front of her dress. I followed her at a distance without showing myself, enjoying being the only witness to these meetings. She was flattened against the stone wall of the garden, playing hide-and-seek, when she saw the mailman and stopped him to get the letter.

For some months now, the three of us had been eating in the kitchen, except on Sundays, when we moved into the dining room. Probably because of her newfound resurrection as a child, Mother had become democratic, and wouldn't let Clara eat alone. "Matildes" and "my dears" flew all over the place. It was like Versailles, back by the kitchen. A setting for bankruptcy.

I found my brother's opened letter next to my plate that November evening. I read it without hearing Matilde and "my dear" chattering, who seemed to have banished silence from their lives. They pretended not to be watching me, but must have seen my expression change, because the atmo-

sphere darkened into silence. I made no comment. But at dessert time (we were still having dessert then), "my dear" said:

"Sparing you military service isn't a bad idea at all. That's why he's getting married.''

"That's it, sweetheart!'' Matilde added. "As the son of a widow, with the eldest already married, you are now my sole support in life.''

(There, her laugh hopped onto the table like a frog. Was she was making fun of me? I couldn’t tell.) "People have told me military service is really quite awful. Have you heard anything about it, my dear?’’

"Lice, honey!’’ "my dear’’ chimed in with far too much energy. "They even have lice! And after all, why should you do military service for the regime that killed Carlos?’’

"There you are, my dear! Carlos and Juan! Both of them!’’

"Matilde, let’s forget about the dead, and look to the sorrows we have now. All right, little lamb?’’

"What a love you are, my dear!’’

What absurd corner of their childhood terraces were they playing in now?

"Leave me alone!’’ I said. (Which perfectly suited the situation and the scene, but left the two adorable little girls sobbing.)

I left the kitchen and went to my room, taking my brother’s letter with me.

Her name is Evelyn. She is blond and American, intelligent and a good housekeeper. She has taken courses in all that, as well as in Spanish, which she now speaks fluently. She is the only daughter of the owner of the chemical factory. He is also American, and has also taken courses in blondness and intelligence. The two of them, Antonio and Evelyn, will get married next month and honeymoon on the family ranch somewhere in Texas. The ranch seems blond and intelligent too, and is certainly American. But the letter

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says nothing about the courses it has taken. Too bad. Ill never know.

Next day, I awoke from a deep, empty sleep with a fierce attack of diarrhea. I went to the toilet with my brother's letter still in the pocket of my bathrobe, which wasn't silk anymore, the bitch. I reread it. I noted that the girl's name was still Evelyn, and that she was still blond, intelligent, American, and a good housekeeper.

I wiped my ass with it, and flushed the traitor's document into the shit-hole forever. Everything in its place.

Clara, who was sleeping less and less, would come put her ear to my bedroom door several times a night, trying to discover the ghosts that haunted my sleepless nights, but she never dared to open it and come in. At times I thought I heard, "Are you all right, honey?" but it must have been just my imagination. When you don't sleep, everything turns into dreams. Bad ones.

One of these nights, she was going to catch cold. The heaters didn't keep the house warm enough for her to be taking these nightly strolls. I was going to have to talk to her.

But Evelyn and Antonio, one blond and intelligent, the other dark and a prick, must be warming themselves very nicely in each other's arms. Son of a bitch!

Clara told me Mother had written a long letter to my brother praising the joys of marriage. It just so happened that Mother forgot to seal the envelope, and, obeying the fixed rules of her vagueness, left the letter lying around her vacant lot of a parlor for two or three days. Clara finally dared to take a peek at it. Furtively, she said.

"You know, honey, you would have thought her own marriage had made her completely happy. What bullshit you talk when you get old!"

"But she's getting younger and younger!"

"No kidding! But at the end, she added a P.S.: 'Every-

thing I have written above stems from my duty as a mother. But for my own part, I am within my rights in telling you just one thing: you forgot too quickly that you were already married. So you are nothing but a traitor. I was crazy enough to think you were the reincarnation of Carlos, but he would never have done this. Carlos was a man/ What do you think of that?”

"I hate her!”

Clara cracked me one right across the mouth. She was still pretty strong, the bitch. My lips were so swollen, I had trouble eating my soup.

They must have both thought I should join my unhappiness to theirs: a kind of misery association. They were wrong, though. I wasn’t unhappy. I was alive.

As for him . . . well, he and I had already said our final goodbye.

I retreated into scientific observation for good. My eyes full of a will for clarity—I was getting as cold as a microscope, those days—I watched my surroundings without getting involved in them. Mother was an insect. Clara was an insect. The few peasants who came to the kitchen door from time to time, bringing milk, eggs, or fruit, were insects. The house was nothing but a hole that sheltered insects.

I analyzed, too. The outside world no longer counted. Not a single newspaper, I mean a current one, ever appeared in our mailbox, even by accident. At times, some old scrap of newsprint, its letters faded by time, would show up from somewhere, wrapped around something. I would see it lying around here and there for a few days, and finally take a look. The world hadn't changed. What I was reading had all happened before, ten years earlier, and I had already read about it in the ancient, yellowed papers Clara had used the day she started her big cleaning of the house in town. And I was sure it would all be the same in another ten years. We were in full stagnation.

So reading the newspapers was pointless. The faded papers' crumpled pages could he around the house winking at me all they wanted; I had lost all interest in them.

Second childhood:

Mother wasn't Mother anymore. She had become Ma- tilde the little girl. She looked after herself carefully in a brave process of devitalization. I sensed that she wanted to become smaller than Carlos the doll-cadaver, if that were possible. And Clara helped. She made her give up tea with lemon, and drowned her in white bread soaked in hot sugared milk. Stewed fruit, little lightly salted omelettes. I wouldn't have been surprised to wake up some morning and see her sucking on a baby's bottle. And sweet little Mother took to going hippety-hop. She hopped about all day long like a little bird, from her tiny wicker armchair-cage to the chronic-death's big flowered grave. And in the middle of those tireless ant journeys, she would stop for a moment to caress the yellow roses of her favorite rosebush, with a hand twisted with hate. Why hate? The question would appear to my analytical gaze, but I couldn't come up with an answer.

Mother took to singing, as well. Old songs by an old little girl in a straw hat decked with ribbons, sinister in their cheerfulness; they sounded like a flea market record.

And yet, it wasn't as if she was less alive each day; she was just a little more dead. She ate well, talked constantly, mixed her brandy with huge glasses of milk. But she had the profound wisdom not to let her food, her melodious voice, or her drink make her more alive. Quite the contrary: it was making her die. Not in the depressing sense of the process of death, but in the bracing sense of the process of life. I would even go so far as to say that her progressive death was made of progressive life. It was a fascinating trick. If I had had the money, I would have taken the same journey to the miracle, with Mother along as the freak, that she had wanted to take with me. Only, with the guarantee that I could show how

the miracle worked ahead of time. It was a pity that the ongoing progress of death didn't have any spectators.

One morning of this death-jig, I found her in front of her yellow rosebush. She was very calm, as if she had been put in parentheses.

"You would probably like to know why, wouldn't you, dearest?"

I looked at her and nodded. I was in no mood to lie that morning.

"When I was eight years old—not that long ago, is it?— Carlos, who was eleven, gave me the first present of our love. I wonder now whether we already knew that it was love. My cheeks turned purple, and he fiddled with his hair, not knowing what to do with his hands. Anyway, he had brought a young rosebush from town for me to plant. He told me very earnestly that he had just read in a book that there were three things you had to do in life: plant a tree, write a poem, and have a child. That made me blush all over again, because it was already a proposal. He added that the saying was Arab or Chinese, or something, I can't remember anymore, and because he felt that planting a tree was more of a man's job, it would better if I planted a rosebush. Red roses. He loved red.

"I took my hat, my gloves, and my shovel, and planted the rosebush here, in front of the window of the parlor where I languished all day long. Our soil is good, unfortunately; everything grows. So the rosebush grew. And grew. Two years later, it woke up one fine morning covered with buds. I was mad with joy. Every bud was Carlos, the red of his blood, the red of my passion for him.

"I’m talking to you like this because I know you are already a man of experience, and you know all about passion. Every five minutes, I would rush out to see whether the buds had opened. And one day, they blossomed—into yellow roses. All I remember now is that I didn't cry. I never

wrote a poem. And I didn’t have a son. He had two by me, but that’s his story. For years, I called for cataclysm with all my might, hoping that one day I would get up to see my rosebush ablaze with red roses.

"The day I gave up hope for good, because that sort of thing happens, I read in a book that you could do something about it. For example, inject a certain chemical into the bush’s branches to force the roses to turn red. Or do a graft, and wait for a year. But for me, that was no solution at all; it was too artificial. Do you believe me? You certainly must wonder why I have such a ridiculous preference and excessive love for this rosebush. The answer is quite simple: I hate it. But I don’t want to be vulgar and say it is the symbol of my life; lack of elegance is something I can’t stand.”

Mother wasn’t sad. The mysterious sunshine of her smile was as luminous as the smile that suddenly breaks out on a child’s face, without rhyme or reason.

It all happened the most elegant way in the world. I heard Clara shout (but Clara isn’t Mother, I told myself later; it was the only excuse for her vulgarity), and went down to the hallway thinking that some thief had gotten into our kitchen to steal what little food we had left. If that was the case, I was sure to find Clara foaming at the mouth with a knife in her hand. (Clara the Terrible.)

But no, the kitchen was empty. That’s when I heard her sobbing, and was hit by that peculiar anxiety you feel when something ordinary happens in an unusual way: she was crying in the parlor.

I went in. Clara was actually bent almost double on the floor, moaning. Mother was dead. With an ineffable smile on her lips and a smoking cigarette in her hand, casually resting on the carved pigeon’s head; her Swiss watch was still ticking. In her wicker armchair-cradle, Mother was dead. Her hair had just been combed, and her head wasn’t slumped grotesquely on one shoulder, her chest collapsed on

her stomach. Death had probably caught her musing on some childhood memory; you could almost feel the parlor still vibrating gently to the caress of a little girl's song, cut off just at that melancholy verse that goes:

I am no Moorish maiden y my lord ,

I am a captive Christian.

Seeing Clara bent in half and moaning in front of Ma- tilde like that suddenly brought to mind the image of Mother's confession to her maid. I had a powerful sense of the stagnation that threatened to become a permanent part of my nature. What equal and infinite time were we trapped in? Alive or dead, we were forever repeating the same gestures and postures, and always would be.

I didn't linger on those thoughts for long. I put out dead Mother's cigarette in the crystal Murano ashtray, the twin of the one that always stood on the little table next to the sofa in the parlor in town, and gave the wicker armchair a little kick, to break the magic circle once and for all. In classic horror-story style, dead Mother collapsed onto the floor. Clara cried out again, but that was all.

Two peasants who used to work for Mother, a father and his son, came from the village to help us bury her next to the chronic-death. They even supplied the priest and the coffin, as well as a wooden cross in anticipation of a future tombstone. The priest didn't waste too much time on his rusty Latin lies; he took his money and left. The old guy went into the house with Clara to get paid and have some bouillon. The son and I stayed at the little family cemetery to finish the job. He watched me work, probably surprised not to see tears in my eyes. You could almost see him thinking, "But it's his mother!" I didn't say anything, just did my job. While he pounded the ground with his shovel, as if he were

driving Mother’s corpse as deeply as possibly into oblivion, I wrote her full name on the wooden cross, the dates 1911-1966, and the family sickness: Bom dead.

The young man was sweating heavily, so I suggested that he come inside for a glass of wine. That made him very happy, and he thanked me with a smile; at the house, he had a couple. He was still sweating.

"You're drenched with sweat. Why don't you take a bath? We have a tub."

Without being asked twice, he said yes, and came upstairs with me to my room, bringing the bottle of wine. I got the bath ready while he undressed. Working in the fields builds nice muscles, and—just between us boys—I told him how much I admired his strength. Again, he was very, very pleased. Then I helped scrub his back. After the bath, I wrapped him in a big white towel, something he had never seen before, and carefully dried him all over, with a skill inherited from my brother. In about two minutes he had a hard-on as big as a horse. I didn't stint in my admiration for his unwonted size. He didn't quite understand the word, but it made him happy anyway. In short, we wound up in my bed, and for a couple of hours he was in no hurry to get back to the village. Finally, as often happens when wine and desire run dry, he did a turn-about. Peevishly, he shoved me away when I tried to help him get dressed, and decided I was nothing but a son of a bitch (Mother had nothing to do with it, he said).

"Aren't you ashamed? The day of your poor mother's funeral?"

That was just it, to have finally buried Mother forever, but there was no point in explaining that to him. So he treated me to all the village variations on the word "fag," got mad, and gave me a first-class punch in the nose. Then he left. But that didn't bother me; as usual, I knew he would

come back. In a choice between she-mules and me, it was no contest. A civilized person might choose the mules, but him . . .

I looked at my blood in the mirror, as it dripped from my nose onto my lips. It was red, the failed color of our family. Red and alive.

I thought of the rosebush Mother had hated and preferred. A rosebush with yellow roses. I smiled. "Here's your cataclysm. Your red roses. Are you happy?"

I could see her eyes, disguised in mine, smiling in the mirror. Mother was happy at last. Thanks to my ass.

A visit to Mother's estate manager filled me in on our financial situation; it was disastrous. Parcel by parcel, most of our land had been sold off at bargain prices to the peasants. (I hoped they would take better care of it than Mother had.) What little was left, the house and the spring—the butterfly well I remembered with so much pleasure, now a sad memory—was mortgaged, and any income we had went to pay the high interest. The manager wound up handing me a few coins, as if he were giving me a present. I asked him to notify my brother of Mother's death and our situation.

"You can tell him it's his problem, if he wants to do anything about it. I consider myself relieved of any responsibility. I'm leaving the country."

1 o go where?

"Somewhere abroad, like him. It doesn't matter."

"Without finishing school, without any means . . ."

"I can work. Everybody does. I won't be the first Spaniard to get fucked overseas, after getting fucked here."

He didn't like my straight talk. "Work, you?"

"Yes."

"How much like your mother you are!"

What fucking bullshit! I hope he croaks. I stared at him and left.

I gave Clara part of the money and sent her to live with a

relative in the village. She didn’t say anything. Her eyes had become meek and poor, and she obeyed. I knew I was putting her love out to pasture, maybe forever, but I couldn’t help it. I closed the house and left. A train ticket. A foreign country; any which one. That was my future.

For a minute, I had a crazy impulse to go to town, steal a flag, and drape myself in red-yellow-red for my trip to shit. But no; after all, I preferred to think I was headed for the unknown. Leave shrouds and cemeteries to the dead. I was going toward life.

"You might say,” a little voice inside me added coldly.

Was it Mother’s voice?

In any case, it wasn’t mine. That was for sure.

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CHAPTERS

18 & 19

£lara’s time.

Here are some more carnations, red ones. Every time I bring you flowers, I feel you’re about to rise from the grave to ask, "Why red, my dear?” in that inquisitor’s tone I’ll never forget. Even dead, I’m sure you would ask as if you didn’t know the answer. And yet you always knew everything. I could swear it on a stack of Bibles. You can’t fool me.

Life is funny. It’s a relief, being able to speak to you freely. Before, I could only do it with my eyes. But now that you’re dead, I can finally use words. It cost me. A lot. These words of mine were about to die unsaid, you know, in the silence of my life. But as it turns out, they’re alive and well. Go on, smile! I really don’t know if they’re mine or yours, but when I say them, without fear of reprimand, it makes me feel better; what can I say? My dear, how good it feels to be able to speak!

Eyes open, open to the anguish and the need to know the real truth of these years of separation. The real truth, not

your truth, or my truth. I’ve given up condemning that streak of anarchy that was injected into us—into your blood and mine—by someone who wanted us fierce and unyielding, even a little, but I'm starting to wonder. Long before conceiving us, when she was nothing but a wave of pleasure in her own mother’s belly (not even a fetal reality, or a spurt of semen shared by two living people just at the moment when pleasure explodes into delirium, but a mere body sprawled on these white sheets, unable to contain the strength of desire), long before all that, tell me, do you think she already wanted us the way we are?

For myself, I can’t accept just being her work. I have spent years in Paris and London, purifying myself in shit (please don’t be afraid of that word; I can’t find any other to tell you what my life has been), and I tore up all the letters her estate manager sent to me—yours, hers, even Clara’s (Clara, dead to memory)—one after the other, unread. During all those years, I wanted only to be myself.

And now I am.

The not-yets of the clock filling this empty hallway, delimiting the time of your non-arrival, are no longer enough to lift the anxiety I feel at being here, sitting stiffly in the wicker armchair, etc., staring at the door you’ll stick your key into—a cheap image of our former happiness—so that your eyes will suddenly meet mine in the half-light, and you will finally realize that you are face to face with your enemy. Not your judge. Your enemy.

I know at last that my love for you can no longer be measured by love. And in this new feeling I again find Mother’s hand sending me into battle. At dawn (Clara the Finished’s hour), I ripped out her suffocating yellow rosebush with my own hands, hands hardened by émigré work with neither profit nor glory. I don’t want any more symbols. Open the door. Come. The madness of these days of waiting, from

Agustin Gomez-Arcos

five o'clock last Friday afternoon until today, Wednesday, March 21, was only memory. Now let's get down to reality. So push open the door, and come in!

Clara's time.

The little one's back at the house, you know. He's been there for a few days now. That's why I haven't come to see you since last week. I wanted to give him time to surprise you with a visit. But he hasn't come, I know. I looked for his footprints on the path, but didn’t find them. I'm the only one to have walked here, all these last years.

No, I haven’t seen him, but I do have news for you. They saw him at the village store. Yes. He bought condensed milk and decaffeinated instant coffee—his nerves must be bad, poor dear. Detergent, too, and that soap you used to love, Heno de Pravia. He insisted on that particular soap. That's why people noticed him. After all, nobody in the village knew him that well. They tried to give him a more up-to-date brand, the soap everybody uses nowadays. But he wanted your soap. He didn’t say “Mother’s soap,” of course, but I know it was your soap he was after. A box of six, at least ten years old, finally turned up in the back storeroom. He paid and thanked them very politely. They told me he used foreign words a couple of times, without explaining or apologizing.

“How is it that you're not at the house with him?” they ask me. You know, with that touch of malice we know so well. “You gave them your whole life, him and his family, and now he neglects you.” I answered that I'd retired a long time ago. I didn't add, “And besides, it's none of your business,” because it was too early in the morning, and I didn't feel like getting into an argument. But I can't pretend I don't feel heartsick. If he hasn't sent word, it must be be-

cause he thinks I didn't love him enough. That's really sad. Now that you're in a place where you can see everything, you know that my love for him was as strong as yours; at least as strong. And one of these days, I'll prove it. To all of you. Anyway, his sudden arrival forced me to change my habits. I don't go to the house anymore, to water the flowers and dust. And I can't open the window of your room and look out at the property that doesn't belong to you anymore, losing myself in it like a little girl. Did you know I often used to do that? And without regrets, to tell you the truth. Because those things happen. It's the way life is.

That's why I've had to make these visits I pay you from time to time—to chat with you a little, and put red carnations on your grave—I've had to make them at night. I'm a little too proud. I didn't want him to see me on the path, as if I were trying to get him to notice me, to tell

him I’m still alive. Especially since I wouldn't be able to resist glancing toward the house. How is he managing, all by himself? His laundry, his meals, and not a word to anybody . . .

At night, you know ... If he doesn't make up his mind to come say hello, it's going to be a hard winter.

Anyway, we'll see. It's still only spring.

Evelyn’s graduate American eyes, not yours, are the first to light on the semi-darkness of the hall. Her graduate American body—an image foreign to my hopes—stands between my look and yours. A pretty sorry anniversary, my brother. This wasn’t in your telegram. So be it.

No hello. I settle deeper into Mother's armchair, into her body. The smoke from my cigarette spreads around me. My watch is ticking. I am her. And not her. And alive.

"Evelyn?"

"Yes."

Her eyes blink. They don't have any fire.

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2 3 9

"It’s kind of dark in here.”

"My mother liked darkness.”

Graduate American Evelyn comes over and tries to kiss me, in a cloud of antiseptic perfume that smells of dollar bills. It reminds me of how the Carlos-doll-embalmed cadaver smelled.

"Out of the way!”

She starts like a ghost who thinks it's a creature of flesh and blood. I get the impression she has been better embalmed than cancer-Carlos. They must cheat the foreigners, over there.

"Out of the way, I want to see my brother!”

The light comes, but not you, not yet. Your wife has dared to open one of the windows of our house.

In the light, I see your eyes staring at mine. You are Carlos, and I feel the storm of Carlos's moustache, your smile flashing like lightning. Shit, shit, shit! Why did you grow so handsome in Evelyn's graduate American arms? Butterflies of memory rustle between us, and, mad with joy, Mother goes hippety-hop in the beam of light that your eyes are shining on hers. You are raping me once again, only this time maybe you don't want to.

"How's it going?”

What can I answer? Speak, voice!

"I must look a little pale to you, huh? I've been waiting here since last Friday, since five in the afternoon. I haven’t had time to shave.”

You come close, take my face in your hands, look at me.

"You're more handsome than ever. You remind me of Mother.”

Mother. Not me.

I listen to your husky voice, knowing you are speaking only for me. Your words reach me directly, slipping around the living ghost already invading the parlor full of dead ones. They paralyze me. You have come back. In love, but mar-

ried. And I, who am more myself than ever, and my love, more love than ever, we are your enemies.

"Why didn't you answer any of my letters?"

"Take it easy."

And graduate American Evelyn keeps on invading.

She calls you "darling." That inexhaustible "-ing" climbs the stairs, comes back down again, stretches out in the hallways like a snake-gong that rings when I lift my sheet, expecting to find you there, you and the little stream of sweat that starts on your chest to lose itself in . . . etc. The tentacle of that octopus-darling tightens around my throat, and I fight back, surly, concentrated, mute, without calling for help. Would you come running if 1 called out?

That foreign "-ing" escapes from my room, a frenetic spiral sowing madness everywhere, from the library to the dining room, from the kitchen to the parlor. At times I feel that it wants to take the place of Mother's little silver bell and that Clara is going to pop out of one of her scraped walls like a genie, sponge in hand and a rag on her head, with "Yes, senora?" on her lips. Well no, you dirty graduate American bitch, no! If you say your foreign "-ing" just once, and Clara comes back from her silence-oblivion to say, "What do you want, senora?" I'll rip your tongue out, the way I ripped out Mother's rosebush last Sunday, to stop the contagion. (Shit! I'm giving away my secret!)

"Yes, I did. I stepped out into the garden Sunday morning for a little air, and I saw that it was still there, its dirty yellow starting to rot the grillwork of the window. I took a spade and dug right down to the roots. I went to the kitchen for a saw, came out again, jumped into the hole I had dug, a grave of failure, and sawed away. Root by root. Then I burned it. Can't you see the ashes?" (I'm shouting, now.) "And don't tell me not to damage the house because it's our inheritance. It might be yours, but it isn't mine!"

I'm sure you're discussing this with your graduate American right now.

"Was the rosebush pretty?"

"Magnificent!" (You're stressing the tonic accent a little too much. Watch it.) "Too bad he ripped it up. We'll have to stop him from doing stuff like that. He's gonna wreck everything. You know, when people get that way ..."

Do you answer, "Be quiet, that's my brother you're talking about?"

Of course not. You always agree with the person you're sleeping with. Traitor!

Hey, calm down. And think.

You need a look.

I don't have a look anymore; I'm blind!

Call Mother!

Quick as frozen lightning, Mother's look settles into my eyes.

Thank you.

"Listen, darling. You're my brother-in-law. And we're going to be living together, at least for the time being. So there is something we have to agree on. You can't keep silent all the time! It could get to be hell."

(Hell is our place, you dirty bitch! Private property. And it hasn't been developed yet. So don't try anything!)

I look at her, letting Mother's eyes do their work. Evelyn, the graduate American, turns pale. Dirty white blotches with greenish centers and blue edges mottle her face. A pretty sight. Dirty as all hell, the bitch!

Full of enthusiasm, I look at her with my own eyes. She never got a diploma in turning pale with a certain elegance. You can tell.

Thank you.

Clara’s time.

Why didn’t you ever tell me what she looked like? I always thought you had met her at the Caracas airport. With Antonio, of course. In the village, they say she speaks a strange kind of Spanish, hard to understand. And that she’s thin as a viper. I jumped when I heard that word, "viper.” It didn’t bode well, but I put it down to gossip. You know there isn’t any shortage of that around here. One of my neighbors saw her at the post office, and said she was so thin, a grain of wheat wouldn’t fit in her stomach. A grain of wheat! That’s really stretching things. "Now I understand why they never had any children,” she adds right away. "You know, Clara, those thin women, they’re all sterile. All of them!”

I answered that you were thin as a rail and that didn’t keep you from having two beautiful boys. "The big one, Antonio, sure . . . but the other one . . . pretty skinny. Not much meat on his bones.” She must have seen I didn’t like her talk, because she changes her tone, and adds, "Handsome, yes. No question; an angel! But Clara, you have to admit that even now that he’s a man, he doesn’t look a day over eighteen!” I wanted to cut her tongue out, but why bother? You couldn’t find two children like ours for a hundred miles around. Neither as handsome, nor as perfect, each in his own way. When you and Carlos used to appear, you eclipsed everyone. It’s the same with them. When they appear, they put everybody else in the shade, and they always will.

"Then why all this foolishness with a washing machine, a record player, an electric iron with little holes for steam, and table settings for two dozen people, if they don’t have any children?” they’re always asking. "Well,” I answer, "they may have guests, now that summer’s coming, and they’re sure to dig a swimming pool in the garden.”

You should have seen the look on their faces when I said "swimming pool.” Their jaws dropped. Because they know Antonio is buying back all the land you sold off. Not that I’m criticizing, mind you. It was your land. I’ve never owned anything, so I’m in no position to judge.

Especially knowing that you did it all for love of Carlos, to give him a death that was more dignified than his life. And there, you really succeeded.

Finally, they say the foreigner doesn't spare anyone, she treats everybody like an Indian. It must be a habit she picked up in Venezuela, in the jungle. But I'm just talking off the top of my head. I don't even know where they lived.

You come and go, making plans to rebuild the house, repurchase our property, maybe even buy back our house in town someday. From time to time, you give me a preoccupied look, you stroke your moustache in a preoccupied way. And your hand, preoccupied by an old memory it can't erase, wanders down to your fly. I am right there, where your hand stops. Someday you'll understand that.

When graduate American Evelyn sits down in the wicker armchair, an ancestral tick in the old frame wakes up and crawls onto her thigh, jaws wide, to bite her. She shrieks with pain, Evelyn does. Obviously she didn't get a diploma in that, either. No American high school could have imagined Mother reincarnated as a tick. A carnivorous tick.

Thank you.

She doesn't quit, though. Nothing gets her down.

She pulls hammer and nails from her belly (sterile, by the looks of it), and busily sets about pounding on the parlor wall. Two minutes later, she has hung up her diploma in home economics. Intelligent, American Evelyn. That's what she brought in her luggage. We'll see if it's enough.

And you ask, "Why don't you eat with us?"

I answer you only with scornful silence. And I make and eat my omelette with herbs, alone in the kitchen at four in the afternoon, just

when you’re taking your siesta with . . . Does she lay her head on your legs, the way I used to when I went to sleep?

The money that pays for the eggs I make my omelette with is yours. It would be dishonest of me not to bear it in mind. The herbs, I gather in the garden. I am poor.

I am pretty sure it was Clara. Disguised as an old beggar- woman, she just knocked at the door, asking the foreigner for alms. I couldn’t see more than her back as she left empty-handed. Once under the old chestnut tree, though, she hid behind the trunk and looked at the house through the hole which is isn’t anything but a closed eyelid now, where lizards sun themselves. I had the feeling she wanted to say hello to us, but with the thousands of miles that stand between me and her, I couldn’t appreciate her intentions. Two tears fell from my eyes. Matilde was crying. And remembering that sad, dirty sight for all eternity, like a dove’s wing chopped off and tossed into the street. The deep shade under the chestnut tree kept me from seeing things too clearly.

And you, you write to Mother’s estate manager, you balance the books, you sign checks, all with the air of someone who has taken everything in hand. And when you happen to cross me in the hall, you ask me why I didn’t drink my warm sugared milk that morning. (Your milk, is what I hear.)

"You used to love goat’s milk when you were little. We’re buying it for you.”

"I’ve grown up.”

If I have to feed myself with your money, I promise I’ll die of anemia.

Mother wakes up at night, and leaves my room like a sleepwalker. She leads us toward your room step by step,

without giving in to the urge to hop; I’m sure she doesn’t want me to do anything ridiculous. I put my eye to the keyhole. Her gaze

examines the room, jumps onto the bed, and looks at you. My heart wants to empty itself through my mouth. Evelyn, graduate American, is clinging to your neck. And you, my brother Antonio, have your eyes open in despair. Your forehead is covered with sweat. And your eyes look for me in the night.

I swallow my heart and go back to bed. Mother's sleepless gaze fixes that image of you in my eyes forever, stolen in the night of her room. Your room, now.

Graduate American Evelyn dirties the garden with her multiform laundry. A dedicated homemaker, just as her diploma framed in gilt plastic says, she stuffs her woman's un- derthings into the washing machine that she ordered in town. Compulsively, she uses her fists to stubbornly push, push, push, so as not to leave a single corner empty, her diploma reminding her not to waste detergent. One pound, two, three, a hundred, a thousand pounds of laundry, and then, with a look of triumph, she pushes a button with her firm, clever finger: the nylon cycle.

An enormous synthetic blossoming appears on the aged branches of Mother's shrubbery and the grass, with its ancestral scents, that Clara used to sprinkle every morning (the domestic hour): bras, stockings, shorts, panties, girdles, bathrobes, nightgowns, and aprons for every hour and second of the day.

One for fixing breakfast, one for serving it, a third for doing the dishes, a fourth for hunting snails, a fifth for carefully making the lettuce, cheese, tomato, chicken, pickle, and ketchup sandwiches she adores, a sixth for sitting on the veranda in the afternoon, drinking a cup of weak tea, a seventh for putting up jam, and seven others to change into from those seven, and seven more, because you never know . . . And also the phantom aprons, the ones she'll wear

when welcoming the friends she hasn't given up hope of making in the neighborhood someday, a cigarette in her mouth and a piece of celery in her hand. And scattered here and there, well in evidence,

your socks, underpants, and T- shirts. You didn't have that many, seven years ago. You went in more for nudism. I see that marriage leads to a certain modesty.

This polyester springtime, dangling even from the lower branches of the old chestnut tree, makes me want to throw up. The blackbirds, magpies, crows, and the other anonymous birds have fled the garden. No more landscape for me, no more sounds. Better to stay alone with my sheets that still smell of Clara’s quinces and haven't yet taken on the nauseating stench of her damned washing machine, cotton cycle.

You talk constantly about irrigation, and you announce that we'll have an excellent beet harvest by the end of the summer.

"What are beets for?"

Every diploma always hides a few gaps.

"You make sugar out of them."

"Neat!" says the graduate.

And the house gradually drowns under a torrent of useless words, useless figures, worrisome percentages that go up and down the stairs, deafening and blinding the angel that watches over me, more alarmed than ever, as I lean heedless over the brink of the precipice. One breath of your completely unfamiliar, metallic voice frightens the butterflies in the painting's chasm, into which I will disappear forever if you, my guardian angel, don't look after me.

But irrigating the property is something to be discussed in a full, loud voice, a man’s voice, the voice of Carlos the enemy, and that's just what you do, wantonly terrifying the butterflies that gilded my head and my body on that twenty-first of March, twelve years ago, when you used that

water you're talking about today to tenderly clean my flesh ravaged by your flesh, my neck ravaged by your lips.

"Neat!" graduate American Evelyn cries again, she who also knows all about figures, percentages, and shares, but nothing about butterflies, or the memory of butterflies, or the golden dust of butterflies.

And your disjointed shouts, less a dialogue than a calculation, clash against the crystal Murano ashtray where Mother didn't have the time to stub out her last cigarette before she died, with that last smile that you fanatics of beets and figures will never know. Never.

"Yes, neat," you answer. "We'll be able to lift a good part of the mortgage that way. In a very short time, all my little brother's worries will be over."

Hypocrite!

You get what you deserve, though: your graduate answers you with a guilty silence.

And the graduate American homemaker gets to work, outfitted with screws, screwdriver, nails, hammers, rolls of tape and electric wire, a cigarette stuck in her mouth. On an old beam, lovingly hewn by some craftsman two centuries ago, she mounts a white sci-fi spotlight that shines day and night on the only soul she has: her diploma.

She takes three steps back, three steps to the right, three steps to the left, and looks at her work.

She smiles, the perfect homemaker; the diploma reflects the image of her greatness back to her.

Then her throat fills with the surviving notes of an old boogie-woogie tune to whose beat the graduate American cows on her graduate American ranch pissed acid forty years ago. She smells of the barn

so much that the sensitive flies are starting to swarm around hungrily, violating her antiseptic universe. Ah, clean, far-off Texas, graduate American Texas!

I sense that the beggar woman in the rich rags is here 248 x

again. Parting my window-blinds a bit, I glance furtively at the circle of flagstones at the edge of the stoop, and see her. For some reason, her rich rags remind me of Mother's dressmaker's tedious work, the pitiless splendor whose remains I used to see, one anniversary after another, in the yellow light of the yellow candles Mother liked so much. I see her stretch out her hand, a hand that has something of Mother's and something of Clara's. I know she is saying "For the love of God." I can't believe she's saying that, Clara the beggar woman, or Mother-Clara the beggar-woman. I stop myself from sinking too deeply into the rottenness of the hallucination. I hear the graduate American voice shout:

"Get out of here! I don't like beggars. I hate poor people!"

Evelyn pulls out her rifle and fires, but she must not have had time to get her sharpshooting diploma (odd, for an American, and especially a Texan, now that I think of it), because she misses.

Tangled in her fancy rags, the beggar woman hops away like a baby bird. The door slams. The beggar woman spits furiously on the freakish squalor of the nylon flowering and looks up at my room. Why is Clara staring at me with that poor-little-lost-girl look in her eyes? "A little girl , my dear ..." Is this another enigma for Matilde's posthumous curiosity? A stream of tears suddenly fills my eyes, flows down my cheeks onto my chin, rushes along my body and out the window, floods the garden, reaches Clara the beggar woman, who vanishes in the watery cloud. I can't bring myself to go out on the balcony to throw her a coin.

Clara's time.

Let me tell you about the dream I had last night. It was funny, when you think about it. Dressed as a beggar woman,

I went to the door of the house and asked for alms. At the same time, I was wondering whatever could have possessed me to dress up in your ruined widow's weeds. I don't know, some odd feeling of having taken on your personality, of continuing you. I'm crazy as a coot, I thought. Naturally, the foreigner greeted me with rifle-shots, which isn't surprising. In two seconds she had riddled my body's ghost with holes. The blood that spurted from my wounds changed right away into red roses, which I put on your grave. Why red roses? I always bring you carnations. Could it be one of your hidden desires that is coming out in my dreams? I'll have to think about it. I wouldn't want to disappoint you in the perfect world you are in now.

That's not the only thing bothering me, though. You know, I don't often dream, but now I have this feeling of longing. It's about that window, the one in the other room, which his hand didn't open to throw me a coin or a piece of bread. A window without a smile. I'm sure there were eyes spying at me from behind the blinds, but I couldn't tell what their true nature was.

That's why I'm telling you about this feeling of longing. Don't worry. You'll get your red roses.

Night is here.

I count the nine chimes that the hall clock is carefully underlining one by one, nine strokes of atemporal time, without malice, without anything at all. Nine hours divorced from any sentiment and any expectation.

I am going down to have a family dinner.

Here is the table. Here is my chair.

I sit down.

In front of me are the plate, the glass, the fork, the spoon, the knife. In front of me: you, my brother.

And around us: her. She is bustling about, looking for the

exact American spot that her diploma recommends for the salad, wearing an apron decorated with pineapples. She smells of deodorant.

In front of me, the bread.

And you again, looking at me. What are you looking for?

"Your eyes are red. Are you having trouble sleeping?”

I look at the bread in the basket, cut into soft, appetizing pieces. There’s enough for at least five people.

"You know, Clara came to the house today, asking for a piece of bread. Just one. She must have been hungry. She even said, 'For the love of God.’ ”

"Are you crazy?”

"Not at all.”

"Why didn’t you ask her in?”

Son of a bitch!

"Why didn’t you call me?”

"Me, call you?”

You look at me. And you don’t say anything more. But it isn’t over yet, old man.

"She threw her out.”

"Who did?”

I look at you. The pineapple apron isn’t around.

"Evelyn?”

I am still looking at you. With her pineapple apron leaning over the table, she now presents us with a platter of bacon and eggs. Glorious! Or at least she presents it as a glorious act. I pick up your bread, shred it with my fingers, and scatter the crumbs on the tablecloth.

"Here’s your bread for you! I won’t eat it anymore.”

She looks at me in horror. Her pineapple apron abruptly loses its springtime cheerfulness. I get up and walk out. You follow as far as the hallway, but don’t dare call me. You are still looking at me. I look at you too.

"Say, have you ever done irrigation work before?”

You don’t answer.

"Have you really figured out what the beets are going to bring in?"

You don’t answer.

I reach the hallway, and you say:

"Don’t sleep naked anymore. If you aren’t careful, you’ll always have that rheumatism.’’

"I don’t give a damn!’’

The bastard! My Mother’s-eye isn’t the only one piercing the secrets of the keyholes.

The hallway is long. A spring moon shines eagerly through the skylights and brightens the emptiness of the stairs. I feel myself

shrinking, surrounded by the chill of a church. The night silence isn't enough to bridge the enormous, short distance lying between us. I go forward as best I can, getting closer to you. Arms shove me roughly toward the forbidden place, your room. Voices whisper to me, "Go ahead! He's there. Look at him. Draw him to your blood, it's his.'' Peremptory voices. Eyes joining mine, not knowing whose they are, but wanting to see you. Antonio, Mother, Carlos, you, Clara, brother, Matilde, Father, all mingle within me. And that interminable distance, endless and short, covered with rugs, furnished with armchairs, where noises faint away like pregnant women, that distance cluttered with presences, stretching on forever, always adding a few more steps for my despair to cover, my heart in my mouth, the fear of not reaching my goal pushing and resisting me with equal strength.

The moon again, a chalky moon lighting the space I am crossing like a thief. An odd sort of thief, on his way to swipe an image that had always belonged to him. Or maybe never did.

The door to your room, or rather the room that belongs to the two of you. The gilding on the door looks pale, suddenly silvered in the moonlight; to my multitude of eyes, it seems to have lost its value. That's really what's involved:

the loss of a feeling, a miracle that is no more. Worse, the loss of an identity.

The rug that meets my knees when I bend down to put my many eyes to the keyhole of your room.

The moon again, sweeping the vanity table where Mother used to pin on her white—or black—mantilla and put on her pearls, the mirror reflecting the image of the two of us, bitten by the teeth of her half-smile from those days. Could she ever have guessed that this mirror, virgin of any foreign presence, would someday greet the image of someone other than Antonio, Mother, Carlos, you, Clara, brother, Matilde, Father, me?

The moon again, cruel and unblinking, detailing with a miniaturist's exceptional precision that bed where the two of you are asleep, worn out by fatigue ... or lovemaking. She is clinging to you as if she's afraid you're going to escape. But your arm isn't around her neck, your chest doesn’t welcome the blondness of her head—because she too is blond. You have lost your most beautiful habits, I see.

You are sleeping restlessly, as if you wanted to flee her presence. With my batallion of volunteers, I isolate you in that enormous bed where you and I were surely conceived. I could detail the disturbing contents of your dreams, the things you yourself don't know, one anxiety after another. I could tell you if I knew the right words . . . but who could prompt me, who could give me those mysterious words? I know you so well, I can't describe you. There is a you of you I can certainly describe. But 1 can't tell you a thing about the other you of you, my you.

Your body, for example. At rest—which memory lends it—your man's head is as heavy as a ripe fruit, and nothing is imprecise on your face: not your eyebrows gently meeting above your nose, not your nose, which stands out like a perfect geometrical drawing, not your black moustache, bushy and rough, nor your chin, made of flesh so firm I sometimes

used to sink my teeth into it to strengthen them, the way a dog will bite a piece of wood. And your neck, the edge of a wild, friendly forest that starts at your collarbones and stretches over your entire chest, gently spreading onto your stomach to that exact place where your manhood proudly rises amid a jungle of its own. And your legs, always spread to show off their strength, which used to take me prisoner every night in our own battles. And your arms, which I thought would forever be my living space, my house and my room, the unshakable walls of my fortress. And then your hands, the wandering eyes of your desire, which used to run from one end of my body to the other so often, without ever wearying of taking the same path each night.

The moon, again casting its pale light.

Open your eyes, will you?

You open them. At last you realize you feel lonely, and oppressed by your companion. And you weep tears I never used to see back in the days when laughter was part of your nature.

I go back to my room, without looking at the dead color of the moon. It's tonight or never!

I lock the door behind me, and draw the curtain. I don't feel like seeing you, moon.

Solitude.

The crickets don't stop for a second; they are announcing the summer, which must already be in the air. They are the first to sniff out the event, and don't want to be quiet, the damned libertines. A noisy solitude. Me, I don't have the time to worry about time anymore.

I go into the bathroom and stare at the mirror. I look pretty terrible. Four days growth of beard, and seven years of circles under my eyes; seven fruitless years, blackening my eyes like punches.

I decide to shave.

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And spend a good hour motionless, my face covered with a thick layer of shaving cream.

A face. My face. Your face. Whose face is it? What does it show?

I dash cold water on my face. My skin recovers its childhood memories as best it can. It blooms with youth, it flowers, it awakens.

Next, my body. In the bathtub, sunk in the bath-salts Mother used to buy.

Finally, my bed. I stretch out, half covered by those sheets of love Clara used to keep in my linen closet, full of good smells. Within this snowy square, where no old battles are raging now, I imagine the past as if it were the future. But I can't make that old feeling of past glory come alive in the present, because the storm brewing in your chest, tensing the muscles in your stomach and your legs and bursting in an orgasm from your very bones, is no longer mine. Even if you are still thinking about me in those moments of passion when animal growls break from your throat, and still looking for me in the far corners of oblivion, that storm, whose ravages I have so often felt, is no longer mine. In Mother's bed, under your young Carlos strength, someone else catches her breath as your mouth nears hers. The universe in which your thighs moved like earthquakes isn't the same. It has changed. Its name is Evelyn. An American, graduate universe, where a new order reigns, a despicable order where you balance the books and plant your rows of new olive trees, paying off the heavy debt left by my schooling and Carlos's death. Mother, in your old madness, why didn't you go further in your search for cataclyms, to real ruin, like a pilgrim of impossible miracles? I know you can see him through the windows of my eyes, lying on the bed where you probably conceived him, his sleep troubled by a foreign presence. If I could speak to the dead, I would go to

your grave on this dirty moonlit night to ask you a thousand questions, and at last give you the chance to answer. But— mute Mother, mute son.

Then my shout. It bursts out of me wanting to be a roar, but is only a moan. A moan that goes on and on, turning me and my room into a single cavity crammed with despair. It fills the night and the house, invading your room and your sleep. It is both voluntary and involuntary, because there are two of me: myself and my despair. You cross the hallway. You try to open my bedroom door, but it is closed. And locked. You order me to open it, as if I still belonged to you. You beg me to open it, as if you still belonged to me.

But I don’t open it, and I don’t stop shouting.

Through the walls of my room and the deliberate denseness of my shout, I can feel your panic, you, my brother being reborn from his own ashes. You go down the stairs, go out into the garden. You climb up the chestnut tree branches, push open the blinds, yank the curtains aside.

And here you are, wearing a pair of blue pajamas that look as if they had been specially ironed for the occasion.

You and your despair.

My shout.

Your despair, moving in your eyes like a wild animal who has suddenly discovered the secret door by which his trainer escapes, on the days he is whipped. Your despair wasn’t entirely mastered either.

And still, that shout. Overwhelming. Uncontrollable. Which arises everywhere, draining and scattering me, a vessel of despair shattering under a burst of machine-gun fire. Which expresses itself completely independently, heedless of my will or my modesty. Which neither my thoughts nor your words can stop. A shout expressing seven years of my need, and yours. A shout that tears me and tears you. Voluntary and involuntary. A shout I don’t know anymore, but which bears your name.

You throw yourself on top of me in a panic. I see you and I feel you. I breathe you. I would like to end this hemorrhage of despair, I swear, but my other me keeps shouting, as if it had broken down just at the moment when suffering leaps the barrier of the mind and finds its physical expression.

You cover me with your trembling body. And I don’t know if I am hearing your words from inside or outside. But I hear them. As I smother.

Your lips race over my face in a panic, like hot compresses to break my fever. A fever from that abscess which is all of me, which has to burst once and for all.

I am quiet.

All that is left in the room is a wild beating, drenched by the sweat of the crisis; the beating of your heart, but wild with joy now, it seems to me. Your voice hasn't traveled, hasn't given orders, hasn't talked to anyone else, or spoken other languages. It is still my brother Antonio's voice, even if it has shed its musical adolescent quality and taken on new intensity.

I am crying. I want to cry. Noiselessly. I know that I am crying through all my pores, that all the eyes living in me are crying with me.

You lick our tears from my eyes before they stain my face, like someone trying to get drunk. You feed on us. And you say:

"Easy, easy. I'm here."

But I know you don't want me to stop, because you really do need to feed on me.

Your pajamas are getting too tight, so you take them off, and enter me. And there are no more words.

At last, I know you have become my brother Antonio again.

Forever.

The foreigner's hand knocks at our door. She is neither

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impatient nor thoughtless. A graduate American hand is knocking on our bedroom door, in just the right way.

Without slowing your panting or taking your mouth from mine, you ask:

“What do you want?”

“Aren't you coming to sleep?”

“No.”

“But you have to get up early tomorrow!”

“Go back to bed. My brother is sick.”

That makes me laugh.

Ten seconds of silence. It is sinking in.

“Do you want anything?”

“No! Beat it!”

We feel her hesitating, then her graduate American footsteps move away down the hall.

We look at each other, really for the first time since the two of you came to the house that Wednesday, the twenty- first of March. Your eyes are burning, your moustache quivers. Your teeth, caught between pleasure and a smile, nibble at my nose.

“Which of us caused the problem?”

“Skip it. We'll talk about it some other day.”

So you put it off. But I pull away; I'm not occupied territory yet.

“Something wrong?”

“I want to go out. You coming?”

“Where to?”

“I don't know, somewhere. Just to go out.”

“If you like. Want to take the car?”

“So I can sit in Evelyn's seat? No, I'd rather walk.”

“Do you feel all right?”

“Of course.”

“Don’t forget, you're sick.”

“Shit!”

You chuckle.

"All right, let's go. There's something I want to show you."

"What?"

"You'll see."

You put your pajamas back on, and your sandals, I my T- shirt and jeans. We leave the room. Evelyn's shadow, a graduate American spy, is lurking down the hall. C.I.A.

"Are you going out, Tony?"

You don't bother answering. We go out on the veranda, then the terraces. I think I hear the muffled, distant voices of four children called Carlos, Matilde, Juan, and Clara. Far from any social convention, they are playing at changing the world, at being madly in love in the moonlight, the same moonlight that is leading us toward the white-walled pad- dock where brave bulls used to bellow in the deep shade of the eucalyptus trees, bulls of another time, doomed by the wind to being forever awake.

Dwellers of the night, you and I cross the river, already nearly dried up, where you can still feel the presence of their childhood: two naked bodies diving into the cold water, two pairs of curious eyes hidden in the bushes, watching that powerful nakedness with amazement. Four ghosts who are returning, mingling in the gentle movement of the reeds. Matilde, Clara—young girls; Carlos, Juan—young boys.

Suddenly, we are on the snake-hill. The crows are away, the snakes too. Sleep. Under the metallic scratching of tall dry grasses blown by the wind, the hill is lazily sleeping too. We take the path toward the mountain, our shadows ahead of us like tireless scouts, huge and deformed by the moon, which has stayed behind.

You pull out a flashlight. We enter the old mine once again, a parade of bats rustling above our heads. We hear the spring, then see it: an enormous empty well, ringed by its little beach of gray sand, bathed by the moonlight. The moon must have hustled to get here, or taken a shortcut,

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since it was following us from afar, before. It has cleverly mounted its throne of stars so as not to lose sight of us.

And no butterflies.

"What happened? They’re gone!”

"They’re sleeping.” You smile.

Time passes. Night-time, without apparent presence.

We are sitting on the sand in silence. You hold my hand in yours. Your hand is a caress. Then you pull my head toward that part of your body where your life stirs with power; your second heart. You hold me to it as passionately as you held me against your chest. Everything is erased and reborn. It is just the two of us again. You become patient and gentle, the way you used to be when I was little, and you had to show me, very gently, your desire to love. To love me. Gradually, I am once again taking the place I had in your life. That special comfort of living in you, which fled seven years before, is spreading within me more than ever before. 1 am filled with happiness.

"Do you remember?”

Which of us asked the question?

"Yes.”

Which of us answered?

Symbiosis of our two bodies, question and answer, that love set against everything, against everyone, you my brother, me your brother, a single being.

"Is it really forever?”

"I don’t want you to ask me that question again. I want you to be sure. I just have one word, and one feeling. I mean, where you’re concerned.”

"What about your marriage, then?”

"I wanted to find out.”

"Just to find out?”

"There was your military service, too. Imagining you in a barracks drove me crazy. With jealousy, of course. I wanted to spare you. And there was my job. Getting married put me

in charge of the factory. It all worked out perfectly. I'm somebody now. I can get a job anywhere here, with good money. It's always important to have worked abroad."

You're talking as if I were a child. I don't answer. It's not that your crude way of calculating your life revolts me, just that I'm starting to calculate mine. Evelyn is still in the house. If you think you're going to have wife and brother both, you're mistaken. No, old man. If you love me, you're going to have to go all the way. I mean really all the way. And choose.

Your caresses are already beyond lovemaking. More than ever, I feel that you want to be my lover. That helps. It comforts me. It's not just my body you want, but my integrity. You feel like my creator. That's all right with me, but in that case, I get to set the conditions. I'm not a child anymore, I'm a man. I haven't run a factory. I haven't married a rich woman. I've just suffered, that's all. You're dealing with a man of accomplishment now.

"What are you thinking about?"

"About her."

"Are you worried?"

"It bothers me."

"What do you want done with her?"

"Are you asking out of curiosity?"

You chuckle. Go ahead, laugh. This isn't the time. You answer:

"Not at all. You're in charge. We'll do exactly as you please."

I call that pronouncing a sentence. The death penalty?

"Really?”

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Sure.

"I want her to go away.”

"Then she’ll go.”

"She won’t want to.”

"What difference does that make? She’ll go.”

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"What about your factory?”

"The factory belongs to her.”

"Can you just leave, like that?”

"There are factories everywhere.”

"I mean her!”

"You’re the only person I love.”

Silence. Caresses. The moon smiles, paler than ever. I don’t like that smile of the moon’s. I hate nocturnal collusions.

"Pretend I’m a judge. What would you answer if I asked you: 'Why do you love me?’ ”

"I love you because you’re mine. I love you because I possess you. I love you because you need love. I love you because you’re disorder, and I don’t like order. I love you because when you look at me I feel

like a hero, and always have. I especially love you because I've finally understood that I can't talk about my love to anyone else but you, and that's what real love is. Two beings who make up one solitude, one silence. And I love you because touching you makes me feel I'm more of a man than anyone."

You look at me as if you were in me. And you are in me. And outside me. Everywhere.

"What about you? Why do you love me?"

"I love you because ... I like destruction, and because you and I aren't the painful consequences of eternal love. I mean of what they call creative love. And I especially love you because no one will ever be able to accuse us of love. Ever, do you understand? And, too, because nothing that people say about life applies to us. I love you because I feel you could love someone else, and yet you love only me. Me alone. We've inherited a streak of anarchy, you know."

"A streak? You mean a ton of it."

You chuckle. Your teeth are like two knives cutting the air where what I am saying takes shape.

Now I know what I have to do. I get undressed, and

stretch out on the sand. You do the same. And you cover me. You penetrate me. You look me right in the eyes, showing me what conscious love means.

The moon disappears. The sun comes up. The butterflies awaken.

"I've been dreaming about you for seven years/'

Which of us said that?

You fall asleep.

I count millions of butterflies above your sleep. I am smiling, I know.

"Tell me, if you could make the world into anything you wanted, what would it be?"

"Just one thing."

"What?"

"A funeral pyre."

In the distance, the house is awakening to beauty. The morning sun lends it an aura of immortality that erases its sores and its ruins. The pair of eagles solemnly wander the sky above the wild fig trees that crown the butterfly well. The two crows, our neighbors, chase each other from rock to rock on the snake-hill. A ghost is walking between the stone walls, heading for the graves of the chronic-dead and the born-dead. It is carrying a bouquet of red flowers in its hands. Behind it, the foreigner's contagious nylons still flower in the garden.

"What about you, what would you make of it?"

"A closed paradise, forbidden to everybody. With you and me inside."

"Fascist!"

You laugh.

"That closed paradise would be the only place your funeral pyre would spare."

"I wouldn't count on it. Nobody said I wanted to spare you, or me."

It's my turn to laugh. You aren't laughing anymore.

My brother Antonio abandons Mother's room for good, leaving Evelyn to sleep there alone.

Pretext: I am very sick. A difficult childhood, the loss of my parents while I was still a teenager, exile. That sort of thing works nine times

out of ten, especially with American graduate mentalities. So my brother has to be with me almost constantly. Gentleness. Duty. Especially at night. Nightmares come up dangerously then, like the tide.

But our fits of laughter at night don't exactly sound like illness. Sleeplessly, the foreigner paces up and down the hall. Sleeplessly runs her washing machine. Finally, after enough sleeplessness, she understands. It causes an apocalyptic scene at breakfast one Thursday morning, when she refused to heat and sweeten my goat's milk. She is free to go back to her native graduate America, my brother tells her. She can swim there, if need be. Furious, Evelyn yanks her diploma from the parlor wall, snatches up her nylon laundry from the garden shrubbery, crams it in her suitcases, and says she is getting out of here. Goodbye. Antonio is nice enough to drive her into town, since he has to go see Mother's estate manager, our manager, now.

Clara's time.

Don't be surprised to see me here, coming to visit you in the afternoon, bringing your red roses. Our Antonio came to pick me up in his big car this morning. It was the first time I've seen him since he's returned to Spain. Christ, how handsome he was! Standing in my doorway, you know, with his lively moustache, as tall and handsome as Carlos when he married you. Yes, you can smile if you like, but we've always had our own universe, and the images keep coming

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back. "Clara, darling, pack your things. We're going home. The three of us will be living together again." I jumped into the car; my bag had been ready ever since the day the little one came back to the house. I never told you that, did I?

Antonio told me he had just dropped Evelyn off at the airport. I had expected that.

"You sent your wife away?"

"I don't have a wife anymore. That's over and done with. I told my lawyer to start divorce proceedings. In Caracas, that is. Here, I'm a bachelor."

"Good for you," I told him. "You only love once in your life, and you've already been in love for a long time."

He looked at me, raised his upper lip exactly the way his father used to, and answered:

"You're right, I love him." (We were talking about the lamb.)

I'm going to leave you now. I have to take care of everything at the house. Do what I have to do. Don't worry, my dear, your will is mine. And theirs.

Everything happens in this world. Our hour has struck at last. Long live freedom!

I stayed at home alone all that day. Looking triumphant, I took a walk to my parents' twin graves. The two tombstones were bravely standing up to the wind from the hill, sleeping in the shade of the chapel-stable. I pulled up the weeds and watered the flowers. I didn't feel like talking to them, but I felt happy. They weren't fooled. Absurdly, the geraniums started smelling sweet that morning. I knew the extraordinary perfume was a message, one of Mother's thousands of ways of communicating. Thank you.

Lighthearted, I went back to the house and started arranging Father's books on the shelves of the library. I had seven years of dust to blow away.

I better get around to reading all this, I thought. I have all the time in the world now. Or maybe I'll make a symbolic funeral pyre of them, for want of anything better. We'll see.

As the twilight deepened, I heard the sound of the car and went out on the stoop. Antonio drove up, the car full of packages; probably presents. And Clara, too, sitting next to him just like a grown-up. She wasn't wearing her fancy rags, and looked wonderful. I couldn't believe my eyes.

"So you're coming back to us?"

"Where do you think my place is, honey?"

"Here, of course."

"So?"

"Hey, I heard you've been trying your hand at begging ?"

"My eye! Old and Red, if you like, but never a beggar!"

My brother chuckled.

"And I heard your trip abroad wasn't any too glorious, either."

"Who, me?"

"You're a real bastard. Not one letter!"

"Oh, you know me . . ."

"I know, I know."

The packages were full of expensive clothes for me. Antonio was as good as his word. Mother's hands replaced mine to stroke the fabric; they know what they're about. The quality was first-class.

At six the next morning, Clara pushed open our door and came over to our bed to wake us up. She was wearing her everlasting maid's kerchief. The roosters had already greeted her, when she went out to water Matilde's garden.

"Get up, children. Your bath is ready. And dress nicely. We're going to have a ceremony. Put on your new suits. Today is July the eighteenth."

"Are you crazy?" Antonio grumbled. "It's only six a.m. . . ."

"That's right. I'll be expecting you in the parlor at eight

o'clock sharp. And don't make me come upstairs again. I'm getting old." She slammed the door.

We got up and went into the bathroom. All of Mother's old ritual whims were there: soaps, bath-salts, perfumes, creams. . .

"Do you know what she's talking about?" my brother asked.

"She said today is the eighteenth of July."

"Does that mean anything to you?"

"It's the national holiday."

"She's nuts! She's turning into a Fascist!"

"Oh, bullshit!"

We spruced ourselves up as if it were our wedding day. What an odd date!

Handsome as models, we went down to the parlor, where Clara was waiting for us. She had on Mother's mantilla, Mother's dress, and Mother's black prayer-book.

And Mother's beauty.

Clara-Mother took two red carnations and stuck them in our buttonholes. She opened the black prayer book . . .

Clara's time.

My dear, I've done it. This morning at dawn, I married your children. To each other. Wearing your black dress and your black mantilla, armed with your black prayer book, I read aloud: "Dear Lord, give freedom to the peoples of the earth"—just between you and me, whoever wrote that was no Catholic. I asked them to stand side by side in front of me, and I asked the older one:

"Do you take your younger brother in marriage?"

"I do," he answered, his eyes bluer than the night sky.

I asked the little one:

"Do you take your older brother in marriage?"

"Yes/' he answered, his eyes deeper than the night sea.

"I pronounce you married. And I declare, in the name of the freedom of conscience we have won, that no one but yourselves shall ever dissolve this secular sacrament. You may kiss."

In front of me, your sons kissed each other. Two men with profiles so clear, you would have been overwhelmed.

You know, thinking back on it, maybe I was a little too solemn, a little too pretentious, but the words were really mine, even though at one point, a tone of voice that was peculiarly yours broke loose in my throat and mingled with mine.

I kissed the bridegrooms, your two sons. And I gave a little speech I had carefully prepared. I said, "In this way, we three, the last survivors of our republican family, solemnly celebrate thirty-five years of victory and peace. Today, the eighteenth of July, the national

holiday. A day of victory, a day of war. But our victory. Our war. Come on. I've baked a cake with thirty-five candles. Let's eat it!”

My dear, you can't imagine how hard we laughed. In that mood, we devoured the holiday wedding cake. Then we got into the car and went to the town with its red-yellow-red flags for a honeymoon. We got back just this minute.

I'm finally happy. Very happy. I've just proved to myself that nearly forty years of silence haven’t killed me, the way it did the two of you. And you know, it warms my heart to find that at sixty-two, you can still be a terrorist. It really makes you feel alive.

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CHAPTER

20

M y graduate American sister-in-law's name is Evelyn. Dead.

My republican teacher's name is don Pepe.

Dead.

My Catholic confessor's name is don Gonzalo. Dead.

My first betrayal's name is Galdeano. Dead. Mother-the-freak's senor dressmaker never had a name. Dead.

The invisible coterie didn't either. Dead.

The young peasant and his father, Mother's gravediggers, aren't called anything. Dead.

The two guys dressed in black and spangled with silver, Carlos's gravediggers, aren't called anything either. Dead. My country's name is Spain. Dead. (A curious detail: we are still awaiting its resurrection.)

Mother-me is named Matilde. Alive.

Father-Carlos is named my brother. Alive.

Our maid's name is Clara. Alive. (Detail not to be overlooked: she leans toward terrorism.)

My brother's name is Antonio. Alive.

My name is Ignacio. Here. Triumphant. Alive.

And delighted to have met you.

Paris - Athens - Paris, May-September 1974

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Born in 1939, Agustin Gomez-Arcos has been living in France since 1968. Before his exile from Spain, he received the Lope de Vega Prize for two of his plays and was widely acclaimed for his translations of Jean Giraudoux. Despite these honors, in 1966 his works were banned, and he left the country, the carnivorous lamb, written in French, appeared in 1975 and received the Prix Hermès for the best first novel of the year. Since then, Gomez- Arcos has produced six more novels, all in his language of exile.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Lawyer and journalist William Rodarmor has translated two books in addition to THE CARNIVOROUS lamb. He lives in California.

was set by American-Stratford Graphic Services, Inc., Brattle- boro, Vermont, in Electra. Designed by William Addison Dwig- gins for the Mergenthaler Linotype Company and first made available in 1935, Electra is impossible to classify as either “modern” or “old-style.” Not based on any historical model or reflecting any particular period or style, it is notable for its clean and elegant lines, its lack of contrast between the thick and thin elements that characterize most modern faces, and its freedom from all idiosyncrasies that catch the eye and interfere with reading.

The book was printed on Glatfelter Offset, an entirely acid-free paper. Haddon Craftsmen, Scranton, Pennsylvania, was the printer and binder.

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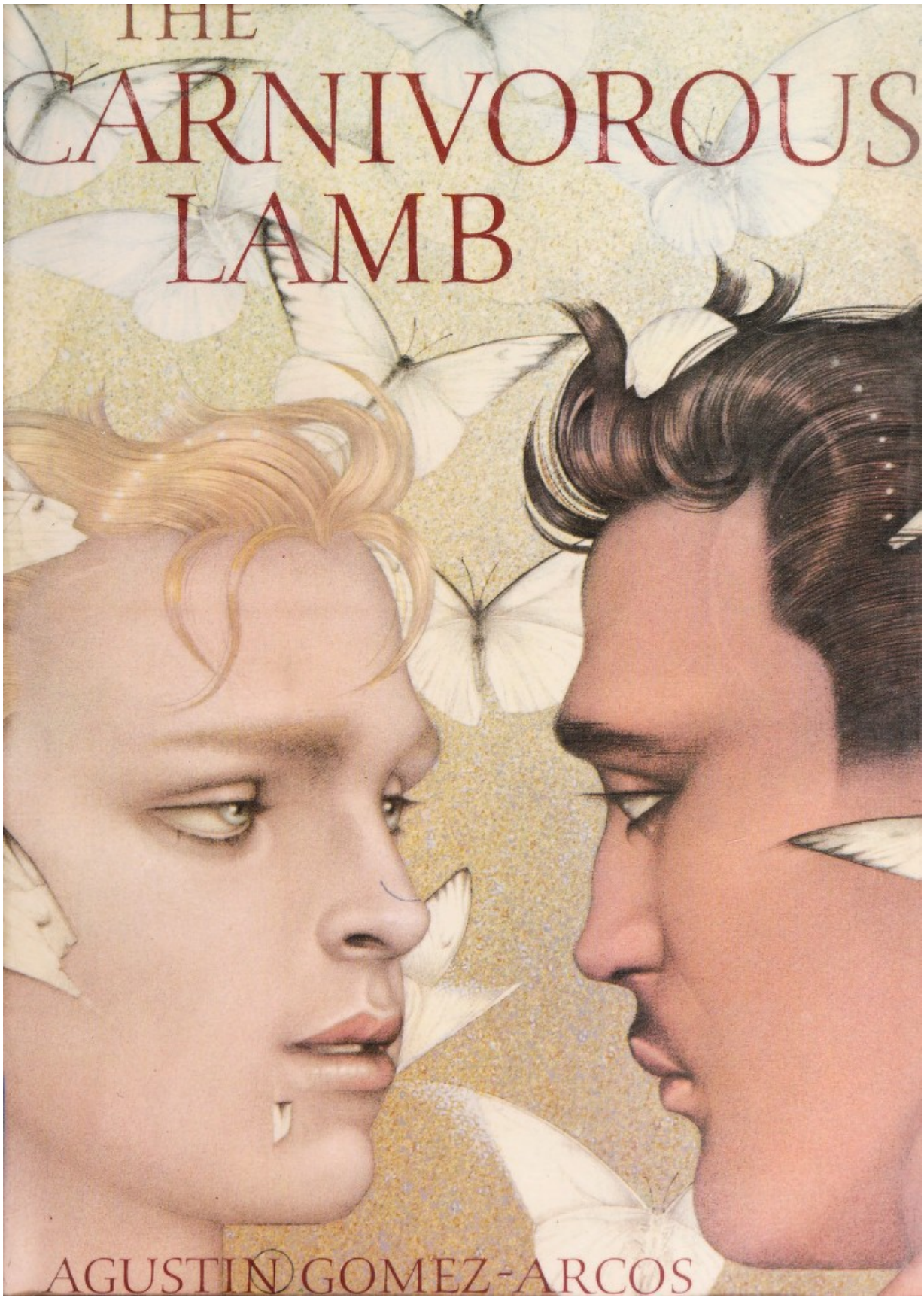
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